2016

Place and Adoption

Erin E. Schmiel
Iowa State University

Place and adoption

by

Erin Schmiel

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Haas, Major Professor
David Zimmerman
Matthew Sivils
Christina Gish-Hill

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Robert Stubblefield at the University of Montana. Your encouragements when I was an undergraduate writer, as well as your continual support and encouragement now, make me thankful and humble to have such a cheerleader. To Daniel, Samantha Stevens, Jesse, Laura and Craig, you are all great writers with whom I am honored to have worked with at U of M. Thank you for liking my stories.

My cohort at Iowa State University was generous with their comments while reading this thesis in its early stages. Thank you, especially, to Chloe for your support, willingness to copy-edited, and encouragement in every stage of my writing (and life, really). Corrina, thank you for copy-editing and for your willingness to always read my work. And to Samantha Futhey: you ask the best question and challenge the early drafts of my essays to become better.

Thank you to my advisor at Iowa State University, Barbara Haas, as well as my thesis committee members: David Zimmerman, Matthew Sivils and Christina Gish-Hill. I've learned to much from each of your in your classes as well as in office hours. Thank you for answering my questions and being great examples of professionalism in your fields. I have learned so much, thank you.

I am blessed to have crossed paths with you all.

LOVE IS LETTING GO

Love gives up and gives over. Adoption is lonely for birthmothers—we literally give away a part of our body, like a limb. I hold and share, my son, Paul's time with his adoptive parents, Barb and John Becker, in the hospital. Then, as if amputating my own leg, I placed him in their arms and limped away. Amputees talk about experiencing phantom pains where their leg or arm used to be. These are sensations of perception—the discomfort itself is not real, but the body remembers the limb and recreates those stings. The sensation is real because the brain is telling the body it is so. This invisibility, this lack of "realness," is a lot like grief. No one else sees your sadness, unless you show him or her with actual tears. Even then, do they understand the sensation or what it means?

Days after the birth, while driving my parents' minivan to run an errand, I pull over to cry. I take that brief opportunity of solitude along our quiet, country road to feel my sadness, to break down and give over to the acute emotional wound. Looking out the window, over the flat grassy ditch full of Queen Anne's lace and Indian paintbrush, to the deep dark of the cedar and birch trees quiets my sobs. These sights comfort and bring peace. I drive home, with the forgotten bell peppers from the errand I had just run, to finish helping with dinner. My family helps quiet the phantom. I can continue living in spite of the loss, and begin to feel the new normal of this grief.

Legal proceedings officiate adoptive relationships in the United States, and I experience this fact at the adoption hearing, in Waukesha County, Wisconsin in 2004. Up until then, I worked with social workers that helped me find adoptive parents: Barb and John. I am happy for their desire for a family, and together we look forward to the birth of our son. I come to think of myself like a surrogate.

Now, in a huge unfamiliar courtroom, I alone have to declare this relationship to the public. It is overwhelming. I feel the pressure of articulating all of the reasons for wanting to place for adoption coming down to this one moment. This hearing itself seems so inadequate, so formal. There is such a long, rich story of my pregnancy experience, and of our open adoption plan, that I want to share with the court. There is also the story of my love, and I want to express that *it* is the reason I am there. The courtroom formality unnerves me; I have never testified before. Nor am I yet comfortable with courtroom language, like "terminate rights" or "guardian ad litem," since undertaking this adoption process. Being put on the spot by the judge, even though she smiles kindly at me, makes me speechless. I forget everything I felt, all of the love for Paul, the necessity to do this. I am shrinking away; my necessity would soon be over. While the burden is heavy, it is better than being unnecessary, and the irrelevance is creeping in.

It isn't that I am going to change my mind at the hearing—the integrity of my word and decision given to Barb and John doesn't waver. I am confident in my decision, but being put on the spot scares me. Having to admit to my misadventures and moral failings out loud is hard. I have no second thoughts or doubts that I want

to place my son; however, I am not prepared for the brevity of the defense and proclamation.

“I just feel the need to,” I say. “I've spent the last nine months thinking about this and I want to do it. I'm prepared for the myriad ramifications.” Unprepared to answer questioning about possible coercion, I quickly reply, “no.”

I gloss over the sensitive details as to how I become pregnant while blushing, thankful for the professionalism of the judge, but at this point I still feel like I am on trial. I made a mistake, all right. And this is how I'm making it right, I want to say. This is just business as usual for the officials in that small courtroom in Eastern Wisconsin. They won’t remember me tomorrow, while I would never want to forget that day.

I fear that those in the courtroom would see my phantom pains, that I would start to cry with all the paradoxical and complex love only I know. The complete joy of seeing Paul is at odds with grief. The sadness of giving him up, even when I knew with every fiber that it was the right decision, nags and chips away at my confidence in my decision. I question whether I am prepared enough for this statement. What on earth can I possibly say to condense my complex experience and answer the question the judge has to ask? "Why do you want to terminate your rights?" Distilling the diametrically opposing feelings I have, down to their bare logical facts, seems impossible. Yet I hold myself in the moment, by the smooth railing of the witness box, and answer truthfully and fulfill my job. I manage a brief statement on my unexpected pregnancy and why I choose to place my son for adoption. I say what

I believe, that I am doing this mainly because I feel it is the right thing to do. I want more for my son than what I can provide now.

My job is over. I carry a baby and give him to a family to raise. There is no more for me to do. I have to fight the feeling of deflation, because it is the worst; it means I no longer have a purpose. The pregnancy, adoption coordination, and then this decision are my only jobs at that time. As such, I don't I need any more support. I don't account for how draining the hearing will be. Feelings of worthlessness start to settle in after my job is complete. Someone to chat with on the three-hour ride home would have helped with this. Just like how at the hospital after the birth, having the support of the nurse on call, and my parents escorting me out the door, help me not feel overwhelming emptiness. I realize, too late, that I need that kind of attention after the hearing. My seclusion was debilitating. My stoicism hurt inside.

According to doctors, phantom pain is a sensory perception. Therapy with mirror boxes help amputees "see" their missing limb through the reflection of the healthy limb in a mirror. They are then able to visualize moving the missing limb, to clench or unclench it from positions that are causing them agony. The therapy allows the nerves to communicate to the mind to let go. My postpartum body adjusts and heals. The postpartum breasts do their job of filling with milk but then have to reabsorb those fats and nutrients. My stomach deflates, returning to its normal size except for new, saggy skin. My physical body functions, as it needs to, and heals itself in the absence of a baby. I am not expecting that the hardest adjustments would be from my mothering hormones adjusting, but mothering is part of the phantom to my body now. During this healing time, I write poetry to try and

unclench those emotions, to search and communicate the feelings of my empty arms, these sensations of my phantom limb, what it all meant.

Seeing Paul helps alleviate my emotional aches. Many months before Paul is even born, the Becker's and I agreed on and established a close relationship that we maintain to this day. I visit often those first few weeks and months, making the four-hour trek south along Lake Michigan from Door County and heading into the heart of Wisconsin to Madison. In their home I was then, and have always been since, Mama Erin. Their love for Paul and for me, as well as my love for Paul—poignant as it is—helps to unclench and heals the pain of my loss. The sadness of saying "goodbye for now" is manageable in the face of losing the chance to make a family of my own. Saying, "I love you" to Paul helps with the phantom pains. He is the phantom pain; he's the "limb" that's missing. But he's also not gone.

Love, being a part of his life, and paradoxically his mere presence, make up my mirror box.

Before this hearing, my pregnancy, or even before I lived in Wisconsin, I saw how love creates a family through adoption. Hadar, Nebraska, is a dusty place of three hundred people in a sea of soybeans. My family lives in the house designated for the principal of Immanuel Lutheran School. The white, gothic style church building is just a block south, and Pastor Krohn and his family live between this church and our house, across the street. Elm trees—planted most likely by early pioneers and certainly by past church members—line the property of our house. It is an old, grey-blue, white-trimmed farmhouse.

Pastor Judd and Barb Krohn move in, when I am four or five years old, during a late night rain. I stay up, looking out my second floor bedroom window, waiting for them, pressing my nose against the screen until it left its imprint on my skin, and smelling the warm green summer air. My parents are up waiting, too, because they, and most of the congregation, were going to help the Krohns move in. I see the truck first.

Years later, Barb, an OBGYN nurse, would bring home a baby girl from the hospital where she works and call my parents in the middle of the night to meet her. Hailey is the only adopted kid I know at that time. The love that adopted parents have for the gift and blessing of an adopted child shows me a new way of thinking of family.

The Krohn's were my inspiration for when, almost two whole decades later, I am twenty-three, single, seasonally employed in Door County Shorewood Beach Hotel, and took a pregnancy test on my lunch hour. I start thinking about adoption.

I bide my time working at this lonely hotel during the fall season and live with my parents. It's boring and I've started to frequent the bars like a local. I plan to soon move to Missoula, Montana, to finish college. I have just returned from a visit out there, where I toured the campus after Labor Day weekend, and am eager to move there permanently. The hotel is on the southwest, less-developed, side of Sturgeon Bay. It's one story and would have a Bates Motel feel to it if it were more isolated. Luckily, Sturgeon Bay is the largest town on the Peninsula, and the hotel has a water view of the bay and the small city. I drive the ten or so miles from

Jacksonport, on the Lake Michigan side, and over the old rickety bridge that spans the bay. There is an echo of the festive golden-resort-days-gone-by in the old defunct restaurant where, I'm sure, there used to be anniversary parties, Friday night fish fries, and summers full of flip-flops and sunscreen. Tall, undisturbed pine trees surround the clubhouse and its empty industrial kitchen. I can almost imagine the smell of the smoke from the flames of boiling fish prepared for tourists. The smell of onion and whitefish are smells of my past. These days we only use this space as a temporary front desk for guest check-in.

I sit in a white Adirondack chair, under the pine trees, with my green tea, looking out over the water before I get up to check which rooms need turning over. Wanting to sit all day and smell the fish, I languish by the shore. I am not on vacation, however, I am the help. While we remodel, folks stay over the weekend in the finished rooms. I turn these over first, out of priority to make them ready to rent again, and they only require light scrubbing. I have housekeeping down to a science. I also deep clean the old rooms and this takes more time. Today there are only two turnovers, so I can get more of the old ones done.

The hotel had sat empty for about a decade so the showers are lightly coated in mold, even though the water had been turned off. It is my job to scrub this away as well as knock down cobwebs. It's satisfying to rid the plastic walls of the fuzzy green mildew, to make it usable again, even though I'm allergic to mold and sneeze profusely while scrubbing. Rinsing the shower thoroughly gets my shorts wet and I swear at how tedious it is. Even though the bleach is harsh, when I finish wiping the shower dry, the smell of it on the air assures me it is clean.

It's lunchtime and I'm sweaty and hungry. I drive to the new McDonald's that was put in next to the Target built on this side of town. I get a chicken sandwich and fries from the dollar menu, then to the pharmacy of Target to sheepishly buy a pregnancy test. I am worried and want to assure myself that I am not pregnant after a one night stand I had had two weeks prior. I take both the white plastic and paper brown bags back to the hotel with me. With the cordless phone in hand for reservation calls, I eat lunch while watching daytime talk shows on cable in room sixteen, adjacent to what will be the front desk once the place is complete. Right now that future reception area is under construction. There is a single, wooden sawhorse in the middle of the room on the plain cement floor, and clear plastic sheeting hangs off of the ceiling of exposed two by fours. I get up to use the bathroom and read the pregnancy box closely, failing to not pee on my hand in the process of taking the test. I watch a few more minutes of TV while waiting, as instructed, before checking the results.

The reading on the stick isn't what I am expecting. I bought it to assure myself I'm not pregnant and that I had gotten away unscathed from unprotected sex even though a nagging innate feeling about my menstrual cycle being late told me to be sure, to consult science. It seems crazy that I would actually fall to the floor. TV dramas show people doing this after similar news, but I don't think it actually happened. It does. My knees give out, my heart starts racing, I literally shout "No!" and deny the results so clearly in front of me. No. No. No. No way. I paid less than ten dollars for this piece of plastic, there is no way it's accurate. Nope. Nope. Nope. My life is not going to be ruined by the read-out of something I just peed on.

I speed to the hospital in my old Chevy Cavalier. It roars down the streets, having lost its muffler a few weeks prior. Before I leave work I call my boss to say something has come up and I just have to leave, all the rooms are done and I can't stay. He seems nonchalant about it, and I hang up quickly. Looking out the windshield, I don't really see the familiar streets as they whip past. I am frantically planning. What the hell do I do now? What if my doctor can't tell me better news? What will I do with a pregnancy, a kid? I can't go to Green Bay for an abortion. I'd have to lie about it and I don't think I can afford it, knowing nothing at the time about Planned Parenthood. I also feel I won't be able to live with myself if I do abort.

I decide it won't work on multiple levels. First, I know that I won't be able to afford an abortion procedure. Second, I don't think I can live with the guilt of ending this pregnancy, even at the early stage I am. Lastly, and most importantly, I won't be able to look either of my parents in the eyes after that. They do not want me to keep something this big of a secret from them. I know that they would be so devastated by an abortion and my sneaking off without telling them. The guilt of the pregnancy is all I can handle; I am not going to add deception, hiding, and abortion to that list.

Then I see, in my memory, a picture I had taken of the Krohns at a party just a few years prior—after my family had long since moved away from Nebraska. It is a "called workers" or church faculty reunion get-together. Hailey is twelve and getting tall, standing behind her is her (also adopted) brother Bailey, who straddles a bike and grins the smile of youth. They both have the same soft brown hair, Bailey's is curly, and they look biologically like siblings.

A proud Barb and Judd stand behind them: Barb's eyes always so bright and feisty, Judd so goofy and kind. There is no question that they are family. The kids even look like Barb and Judd, my mom says once. They are meant to be and they are whole. Remembering them gives me hope that an adoption can all turn out okay without having to interrupt my life any further or to live with the guilt of an abortion. I can put things on hold for nine months and carry this baby for someone else. Michigan Street blurs alongside my car's mirrors. I can make a family as happy as the Krohns. I can give this baby to parents as loving and kind as them, and I wouldn't have to be a single mother.

Parking in the lot at St Mary's hospital happens in slow motion. I still don't want to be pregnant and want my doctor to tell me I'm overreacting. But one does not just walk up and see one's doctor. I realize this as I hurry through the sliding glass doors and my stomach sinks. I have to check in at the desk. I don't have an appointment; I am here on a very necessary whim. Even though this seems like an emergency to me, I have to wait and get through the paperwork. The secretaries can see the urgency in my face and that I am not leaving until I see Dr. Balistrari, and they seem almost reluctant in the obstacles they place before me. "Do you have an appointment?" No. "Do you have insurance?" No, I'll pay whatever needs paying right now or bill me. "Fill out this form," the lady says. "Is Dr. Balistrari your primary care physician?" Yes, she's our family doctor and I only want to speak to her. Does she have any openings? I just need to talk to her for five minutes.

"What's up kiddo?" Patti asks me when I finally make it back to her exam room. She knows how to read me—her patient since high school. I see her as

practical, levelheaded, and easier to talk to than my own mom. I tell her about the pregnancy test and plead with her that I need a hospital-issued one to be sure.

"Those home kits from the store are ninety-eight percent accurate," she says. I keep returning to how awful this is to have gotten drunk and hooked up with someone; I feel terrible, I am terrible, I tell her. She sighs then and says; "I don't even remember getting up from the table I was so drunk on the night I got pregnant with my daughter."

This is surprising. But I am insistent. "You were married!" I whine to her.

She pauses, neither confirming or denying this nor elaborating, but simply says, "tell your mom." She is my mom's doctor too, knows us both, which is odd but certainly not uncommon for a small peninsula with only one hospital.

"This is too much for her," I counter. "There's just no way she can handle this. She has too much on her plate right now. Dad's job is too stressful." But then I think about how Mom was pregnant with me at their wedding. I tell Patti this.

"Then she'll understand!" Patti smiles as she says this, flabbergasted. I can tell it seems simple to her. She is a mom, and maybe she's right. "Your parents can handle more than you can think."

My mom works for an eye doctor downtown on Main Street, Sturgeon Bay and I drive straight there after I leave Patti. I don't know what else to do. Mom knows just by looking at my face that something is wrong. She is behind the front desk as I sit down in one of the chairs for waiting patients. I cannot speak until she takes us to Dr. Paulsen's private office and closes the door. I am still unable to tell her, even though I decide I should. The words are just stuck in my brain. I try to

force them out of my forehead telepathically, for this seems more possible than having them come out of my mouth.

"What is it? Drugs, alcohol or pregnant?" I tell her it's the last one. Her eyes bulge out in what could normally be considered a comical way, saying everything as they widen. I assume the same feeling I had while falling to the floor is now washing over her. I, oddly, feel relief because this part is over. She knows. In the devastation of this knowledge, I soften it by telling her I will place the kid for adoption; I have a plan. I don't tell her I confirmed this news with a doctor and was advised to come here, that seems irrelevant for some reason. It could only get me to this moment and now it is up to the two of us to continue to take the next breaths and walk out this door into the rest of our lives.

I tell her I need to get to my next job at Mr. G's restaurant. She works there too, in the kitchen, and I'm a waitress. "Will you be able to work?" she asks. Will I be able to concentrate on orders for salmon with this on my mind? Yes. I am dying for the distraction, the movement, the carrying on of life to help me sort through this. Going to work is a complete relief to me.

Before we get up to go, she leans in for a hug and gruffly says, "Well, I still love you." I think it is only here that our eyes well up with tears at the enormity of how our lives are changing. Her voice is gruff, because she's trying to hold it together for us both. A thanks is all I can think to say, because my mind is already racing to work. I cannot stop for too long; I can only move forward. And she cannot stop either and has to continue working. We cannot sit there and cry. That's the real tragedy of the moment. No time for release, only time to move forward. I have not

yet cried all day. I ask about Dad. Would we tell him tonight? She says she'll tell him later. He has a big meeting at church that night, and we'll wait. "Let him be mad at me," she says, meaning he'll be heartbroken that we don't rush to tell him such big news. Relief and pressure lift off of me and I leave feeling light.

Adoption falls under the anthropological term “fictive kin.” This is: kin that is created, chosen. We add this kin, create this kin and there are fears there, precariousness in creating a family out of nothing. Not something solid and tangible like blood or biology, but simple words: I choose you as family. Fictive kin is created by words. I adopt you to have the full rights as a child. The apostle John, according to the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* said that, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.” The "word" in this context is Jesus, a tangible flesh and blood person but who also transcends those simple corporeal features and is also God's Word. Learning this in Sunday school makes me feel prepared for other such paradoxes later in life, that a son can be my biological offspring but not my son, and that a family of strangers can become kin through our shared love of this child. Creating something out of nothing is something I can accept. I read about that paradox in the Bible since the time I was young.

I believe God's love is transcendent no matter what, and knowing that, believing that, I feel that choosing adoption, choosing fictive kin for my child, in the form of an adoptive family, is the best thing for us both. We need help, extra people and extra love. Our culture likes to say that all you need is love; The Beatles sang it and it's everywhere in current pop culture and social media. I need and want more

than just my love and my family's love for this kid. And I think maybe love by itself isn't enough, or that it is the easy part. I have a big heart with room for love but don't have a full-time job, a place of my own, and not, especially, a partner with whom to raise a child. I need more than love, so I look for others who can provide two parents, piano lessons, soccer games, siblings, and a nuclear family like I have. In wanting a traditional nuclear family for my kid, I also create a new relationship for my family—that of a birth family—reinventing for us what a family looks like.

Love is a harsh taskmaster sometimes. I search outward for more love. It isn't so much that I think, for sure, that mine isn't enough, but I do doubt it. And perhaps I seem awful or sad for even saying this; it might mean disturbing things about my character or my self-esteem. How could I possibly have such a low view of myself? But is this quest, for more love, transgressive or transcendent?

I need more resources to care for this impending baby, and I learn that this is not a flaw of character. I don't forget the love of my family but also don't want to challenge or stretch that love to a breaking point living in their home as a single mother. Even though I realize later that things would work out, I don't want to be a single mom. I don't want to live at home, relying on my parents to help me raise a kid. The social ramifications, while secondary to what is best for my family, could not be ignored. Unwed daughter, raising child with parents, just doesn’t fit in my idea of our community in Jacksonport.

I might be too concerned with what I think is right, correct, and familiar as I perceive it. One oversight might be that I don't discuss raising a kid with Mom and Dad, but I also had made my decision and want to pursue it without further

complication. I don't want to raise a child with them, and that's the reality I saw before me in this pregnancy. I chase after an ideal family for my kid and don't question my assumption that this meant a "nuclear" family: a married mom and dad raising kids in a two-generation household. Even if there is a missed opportunity to grow closer to my parents through creating a three-generation household, or even just living near them, I want out. I want freedom. It's why I plan to move across the country in the first place. I am already close to my family; I need to figure out who I am apart from them.

I believe it is better for the child, too. I see myself resenting the fact that I would have to stay home, stay in Door County, stay where I had graduated high school. I need to move forward on my own, and I don't want to blame the kid for holding me back. These scenarios are what I see when I think about keeping the baby, but the idea of adoption makes the future look better. Adoption is the positive outcome. I had seen how it worked out in the family of the Krohn's and that was enough for me. I wanted my kid to grow up with more than I could provide. I also needed to grow up.

It is not until years later when I become close friends with a single mom, Kassie in Missoula, and I see her life with her boys, I see the challenges she faces daily: the absent baby daddy who doesn't help her raise the boys and barely pays child support and the challenge of holding two jobs. She, of course, loves her boys, and many of us face holding down two or more part-time jobs in Missoula's economy with or without kids. I know it is hard for her and it simultaneously reinforces how happy I am with my decision, but it also shows me how being a

single parent can work out. I am proud of her and wish we could be mothers together. Also, watching her struggles to parent alone (albeit with her parents' help), I see that she does need support. Her boys do need their father, and his choice to be absent is beyond lame. It is wrong. He needs to be there for them, responsible, whether or not he and Kassie are together. They don't need to get married for it to work: he just needs to be present and responsible.

In my situation, there seems to be no way for me to allow the birthfather, Matt, into the equation. Legally, he would have to pay support if I raise the kid, and I don't even know how to wrap my brain around that idea. I don't want child support: I want partnership with a husband. Until I have that, or am ready for that kind of relationship, I don't want to raise a kid. It honestly seems easier and better to place the baby with what I consider a traditional family, like the one I enjoyed as a child, and I can remain single, unattached, and carry on with my life.

Is this easy? No. It opens up a life full of new challenges, but I like that both his, the baby, and my family expands, and I find comfort in the fact that adoption just means more people to love him. How is that a bad thing? Figuring our roles of birthmother, birth grandmother, and birth grandfather as well as what these titles actually look like in real face-to-face interaction is extremely new to my family. But it's the new normal for us. There is only looking forward and enjoying time with Paul, my birth son, in our open adoption.

I have to learn this quickly, on the fly. I am not going to pursue Matt and assume we'd decide to live together to raise this child. This had been a one-night thing and we don't know one another. The next time I see him after our night

together is to knock on the door of his two-room house and deliver the news of my situation, to inform him of the paperwork soon to arrive, alleviating him of responsibility. My friend Amanda and I pull up to his house together. I go with Amanda, who I've worked with for years, because she knows a lot of the local people in Northern Door County and helps me track Matt down, find out where he lives. I cannot do this without her, and I need Matt to be on board with terminating his rights just as I'm prepared to. As I set my feet down on the gravel driveway, telling her of this reasoning, this plan, she says plainly, "You're going to rock his world today." Yes. It's about time I stop carrying this alone and told the only other person it affects just as deeply as me.

He answers the door and grins when he looks us over. I'm not sure if it's in recognition or if it's because two girls are on his doorstep. I stifle my eye roll.

"Do you remember me from Husby's bar in October?" I ask.

"Yea, sure I do," he says.

I introduce us and basically push us all in the door after asking, "Can we come in?" with faux propriety. It's a cold February afternoon and it seems like this conversation shouldn't happen in the doorway.

As I enter the house, I notice for the first time, since sneaking out that night in October, how it looks like a converted garage on what might be his parents' property. That's the sense I get from it. It might be a post-college or in-between-semester house. I could be wrong about all of this; maybe he is just renting it like others before him had. I walk across the linoleum, designating the small kitchen, and onto the carpet of the living room to the couch where he sits, trying with all his will

to disappear under his baseball cap. I almost trip on the metal pokers lying on the floor, in front of the wood stove. I, too, am nervous. I sit next to him on the couch and can't help myself from reaching out to comfort him by touching his knee. We don't know each other well, but I do want to reassure him.

We need to discuss the business of signing papers. I tell him lawyers will send these documents later, terminating his rights as a parent. I figure I am giving him a beautiful out, solving a problem for him he'd never have to face again.

The only thing he manages to say is "Are you sure it's mine?" He loses the ability to speak once I say, "I'm pregnant" and he tries hiding under the cap, tries holding himself together. I am so angry that he asks this because I don't like what it implies. Of course, I know, I manage to say. I had written about that night in my journal, I know exactly when it happened. The immensity of my mistake, the lameness of my actions is confirmed by his word. But I am also comforted with my decision to place for adoption; this guy isn't someone I want to get to know.

These are my naïve thoughts of the moment. That it's so easy for him, and he never has to see me again and he can move on. This, of course, cannot be the case. I'm not proud of this in retrospect, and maybe it all happens too quickly. He has to wrestle and come to terms with it just like I do.

The only other time I ever saw him was maybe a year or two later when we spot each other across a dimly lit and crowded bar in Fish Creek, his hometown. He bolts for the bathroom. I stand outside that door thinking we have to talk; I have to tell him everything about the baby, now named Paul. He needs to understand that Paul might need him some day. Adopted kids look for birthparents and that is why I

want an open adoption, so that he won't think for a second that he is unloved by a birthmother who abandons him. Barb, too, is sad that she doesn't have baby pictures from the birthfather. She wants to know whom Paul might look like. I need Matt to know this, to not be oblivious; even though I have once thought he didn't have to be involved. After the birth, I realize he does need to know.

I play out the scene in my head as I lean against the wall next to the men's room door. He'd see me and want to ask about everything, shyly at first and uncertain, but I would help him. While I tell him how wonderful everything is with the adoption and how it all works out, he would be as happy as I am about this. Instead, he bursts through and flees through the Friday night crowd to the bar's door and into the night so fast as if to make it all disappear. I wonder, then and now, how long, how far, and how fast he ran that night. I hope he finds rest eventually.

"You probably know more about love than most," my friend Geoff says to me on the phone, trying to comfort me. Sad, hot, and confused tears leak out of my eyes. I'm trying not to full on wail, and my face is hot with the effort of holding back so that I can speak. Did I really know more about love? I feel like I don't know anything, as if I am just making this adoption up as I go along. Alone in my parents' living room in Jacksonport sleeping on their foldout couch, I am still healing from the physical aftermath of giving birth. I live here a few more months before moving to Montana and going back to school. All the same pictures from childhood are lined up on the piano. They recently painted one wall purple, and I stare at that bright, artsy

wall most mornings from the couch. Everyone is gone to work but me. I get to sleep in while my poor engorged breasts heal.

I gulp into the phone. "A year ago today I got pregnant," I say, feeling a paradoxical combination of guilt from sleeping with a stranger but being stuck in the simultaneous feeling of not regretting the baby I had just delivered. I never wanted to be pregnant and was mourning that, but this is countered by how much I love the child. I can barely speak into the small cellphone, its buttons getting soaked by my sweaty face. Geoff chuckles his, that's-so-crazy-I-can't-possibly-say-anything-about-it laugh.

"I'm sad. I don't know what to do with this," I tell him.

"Well, I'm really happy right now," he says. He has just replaced the wiring in a house and the work is going well. He is having a fantastic day. I can hear in his voice that the work is indeed good. I smile. I helped Geoff replace a roof on a Milwaukee bungalow the year before and right before the pregnancy. My life is so entirely different now. I feel like I am traveling through a tunnel and am peeking out on the other side, missing those days of the year before and the emotionally simple, physical work and life before. The new world on this side of the tunnel is not yet familiar and mostly makes me ache and cry.

"You can have my happiness," he says. "Just take care of it and keep it out of the rain." I laugh at this, picturing a tarp against a brick wall like on the house we roofed. It's so odd, giving someone your happiness, but it works. He says something comforting. The realization of the date unleashes a floodgate that I have trouble

closing. Geoff helps me see that I don't have to stay sad out of penance, I can just cheer up with his help.

I don't think I know anything particularly unique about love after the adoption, except that I fear I fail to love enough. In this fear, in the dark moments, I wondered if I just couldn't love and that was why I didn't raise Paul. The darkness said something was flawed with me, that I would have pulled it together if I loved him enough, if I were good enough.

Noticing what day it is eats away at me. The phantom pain becomes a real pain of guilt and sorrow at what might have been if I made different choices. The joy of the birth, and even at the importance of the adoption, fade away this day and it's why I call Geoff, and multiple friends looking for someone to pick up. I am drowning. I have no way to cope, alone in an empty house. I don't feel full of love for the child, or myself. I feel only sadness. I am stuck, but I discover the love of others not burdened with what I go through, able to show me that life does move forward.

Moments of pain like this one torture me about why I did anything the way I did in the last year. Why I made any of the decisions, why I placed my son at all. I am haunted by phantom pains of doubt like when the judge asks questions about coercion or pressure that may force me into this decision. My answer is no, I felt no pressure. I made the decision on my own. But I *did* feel pressured, just not in the way that she means. I have not been forced to do this but I know an argument could be made for how my social and cultural upbringing led me to feel shame at becoming pregnant. I am still feeling that shame, even though everyone focuses on my sacrifice of surrendering my child, showing my love for giving him a better life.

This aftermath makes me see that I might be too worried about tarnishing my dad's position as a church leader. I don't want the congregation to know about this "failure" on our family, because of my wrongdoing—as well as the perceived lack by my dad as head of the household to keep me in check. I don't want them to judge, but they haven't. He is supposed to keep all of his kids in check, my two brothers included. Even though we got into trouble now and again neither of *them* would get pregnant and have their mistake visible like mine is. Dad's lack of anger at me, however, is a sign that I probably am not being as judged as I think I am.

As I shake my pastor's hand on the way out of church one day, I can tell he is just realizing I'm pregnant. I'm surprised that he looks happy, like he is about to congratulate me. This pastor, Pastor Lindeman, is a smiling man with a thick Wisconsin accent and has been the pastor at Zion Lutheran, where my dad teaches, for a few years. We don't say anything else about it, but that look of wanting to congratulate me rather than damn me is uplifting. I have misread my community. I regret not listening to my instinct to talk to him more about how I felt when I became pregnant. He would have listened and shared comfort.

There is tension between him and my dad as far as what to do about problems that are occurring at the school. I overhear a lot of my mom's complaints and frustrations about Lindeman. I wrongly think that seeking out his guidance, as my spiritual leader, would be a betrayal to my mom. So I remain in perceived solidarity with my family. But my situation is separate from theirs and Pastor Lindeman has seen that. But I don't want to add trouble or drama to the situation. I

stay quiet; I keep my thoughts and fears of the implications of this pregnancy and adoption to myself.

The shame and fear of rejection that I think would come from the congregation comes from inside myself. I didn't see it around me like I thought I would. I rejected this pregnancy on my own and chose adoption because I didn't want to live the life of a parent if I kept the child. Sex outside of marriage was taught as one of the worst sins, so I had really messed up. And then, with a pregnancy on top of that, I was going to be one of "those girls," a single mom. I really held on to that idea of Puritan chastity and ostracism when the reality was a pastor bursting to congratulate me and not publically shame me. I wasn't proud of myself for getting knocked up by a stranger. It didn't live up to the standards I had for myself, taught at this church and as I grew up. But adoption was something I could be proud of. I took pride in creating a family even if it wasn't my own.

Love is letting go. Love is also taking on, adapting, being creative, being patient, and reaching out. There is never an absence of love in my life and maybe Geoff is on to something when he claimed that I know more about love than most people. I know more of love, if not about it.

There are only a few thousand birthmothers in the United States per year, and their story isn't always told. Their love is sometimes only seen at the beginning of a child's life when their job of carrying the baby is over and they let go of their child to someone else. Sometimes they are not heard from after. Traditionally adoptions were closed, meaning records of the child's whereabouts and status are

kept from them. The baby is also taken from them immediately upon delivery. They hear the baby's cry and then no more. This is haunting to me.

The phenomena of open adoptions, where a birthmother has the rights to open records and communication with the adoptive parents and child, is still new in the United States, happening with more frequency in the early 2000's. With new language and words for description comes openness in talking about it and new understanding. I saw people's confusion about adoption firsthand when the Krohn's adopted Hailey. This was the early nineties, and I was eleven. I hadn't seen a family beyond my nuclear one, where mothers give birth to children and raise them with a husband.

Barb Krohn introduces this new openness of adoption and way of creating family to me as well as to our whole tiny community. Here, the birthmother is heard from after placing Hailey for adoption; her presence was in the form of a gift: a music box. "Over the Rainbow" played out of this Noah's Ark music box while it sits displayed in Barb's dining room.

"Hailey's birthmother sent this," she tells my mom and me. As we stand listening, I marvel at the gift. It doesn't surprise me; even then, that Hailey's birthmom would send a gift. She wants Hailey to see it and think of her perhaps. What is uncanny, at first, was that Barb displayed it at all. Seeing Barb's joy at the box, the focus on it as a gift for Hailey meant she didn't want to hide Hailey's adoption. "It's funny, isn't it?" Barb laughs, I thought she was expressing her amazement that a child so her own came from elsewhere, but she went on. "I don't know why it plays this song. It's from the Wizard of Oz, right?" I laugh too, not

concerned about the song because I have always loved when Dorothy sang it in the movie, but this dispels my initial uncertainty of the gift itself. I respect Barb's openness about her daughter's origins and it helps me get over my doubts over this different family structure. It is still displayed, because it came from Hailey's biological mother. I liked this, even as a kid, this place of honor given to Hailey's birthmother's gift.

Adoptive moms have a unique knowledge and experience of love. I see that Barb has to answer for her love, and I see her generosity and patience when explaining her family to others. Something many other moms don't need to do is validate their family. Barb let go of a bit of her and Judd's privacy by being so open about the birthmother and the adoption and has to give a lot of her patience to answer questions because of this. Questions come searching for validity like: "Who's her real mom?" "Can you love her the same as if she were your real kid?" "Why did you adopt, can't you have kids?" "What's wrong with you?"

She has to defend herself, explains the nuances to our community who perhaps don't understand the depths of love and that love makes a family, not just biology. The true answer of these questions was, "I'm her real mom. We're her parents." Adoption doesn't make a child any less real as another member of the family. Adoptive parents' generosity sometimes gets forgotten because it's easy to see how the birthmother has given so much. An adoptive mom, like Barb, is generous with patience, attention, and honesty.

Do birthmothers know more about love? They know that love is letting go of the baby that was once a part of their body. I hope that they know that love can hold

them together. I know God's love and feel it keep me together as I fall apart. When the doubt hits hard, and ugly guilt creeps in while low and depressed and vulnerable I turn to spiritual comfort found in my faith. I don't understand more about love as Geoff implies on the phone, but I do overflow with love and it leaves me helpless and speechless. I am helpless to the love, paralyzed by it, and completely at a loss for how to defend it to people who can't wrap their brains around the reality that love is letting go.

I stare at Paul when I go to the Becker's house to hold him or play with him. Carrying on a conversation is almost impossible; all I do is focus all my attention on him, wanting to notice every detail of his face. Making him laugh keeps me happy for weeks afterward, after I return to Missoula alone. But the love hurts too, a little at first. My pride and love for him is sometimes masked by what I am missing out in--the community recognition of motherhood. But I join him on some of his birthdays, holidays, his baptism, even seeing him sing in church, listening to him play piano. I witness what he is up to and then also get to live my life but apart. It is the a part I choose out of a feeling of not being ready to parent, not having the resources or the desire to do so. While pregnant I prepare to be a birthmother, knowing about the son and being active in his life, but not being responsible for him day in and day out. Feeling and knowing that I am not ready to be responsible for everything a child needs, I give him to the Becker's— who did want to be responsible for a child, to raise and love a child. Love is never under question. Of course I love Paul, and I am unprepared for how much I love him and how overwhelming that love feels when I see him. I don't know what the ache was, more phantom pains of grief? But there is

no grief where Paul is concerned. When he is present: there is love, there is joy. Knowing him, seeing him, takes the pain away.

It is as if he is the mirror box therapy. I relinquish my parentage of him, the mother relationship, but he never disappears. Over time the more I see him, I feel less like an amputee. Paul reaches out and holds my hand while we cross a street when he is a toddler. He reaches out now to chat online, send me pictures of cars he thinks are awesome, and writes poems for me. He's eager to show me what he builds with LEGOs, what he learns on the piano, and what books he reads. We're old friends. We are whole.

CHURCH SCENES: WITH OR WITHOUT THE ORGAN

I remember very clearly the moment when I became sure that I was different from other Christians, other Lutherans. I had suspected this fact all of my life when I noticed how I cared so much for other religions' creation stories or that humans were polluting the Earth. It may have been a matter of communication or interpretation in certain moments, but even though I believed the same core things, I was clearly not as conservative, placing "too much" importance on things my church community didn't seem to think about.

"The Bible doesn't talk about energy," Pastor Lindemann says to me in front of the entire Bible study group. Less than ten of us are gathered in the small parish hall adjacent to our church, Zion Lutheran, out in the Wisconsin countryside. The warm smell of the hardwood floor is strong inside this unadorned white room. I'm visiting my parents, home from college at the University of Montana, and they sit at a table with me on metal folding chairs. I try to give an example in the discussion we're having about prayer.

"I can see how it's invigorating to pray with others, because their energy can be uplifting for those who are tired," I say. Lindemann misunderstands me. I try and elaborate, but am crestfallen, when he abruptly dismisses what I say and moves on to his next point. He's not as patient as my pastor, at the church in Montana, Cloute, who would want to understand what I mean. I boil with frustration and the mortification over what feels like a shaming. I glance at Mom, who looks uncomfortable, and become even angrier. I know how paralyzed she can be by any judgment she thinks people are inflicting.

I'm not embarrassed right away, and not because he's right and I'm wrong. I know the Bible doesn't talk about *energy*. But I didn't mean "energy," "chi," or life force per se, but meant enthusiasm, vigor, encouragement—and not in a, God forbid, "woo *woo*" new age-y way. It's typical, even in our circles, to say one has energy when one is well rested and not lethargic. That was simply what I had meant. An energetic person can help enliven the action of praying, which can easily become a stultifying endeavor.

In that moment, I am embarrassed from feeling silenced and misunderstood. It bugs me, stays with me for over a decade. Even though I am confirmed in this very church, my simple remark and dismissal makes me feel like a foreigner, like everyone there thinks I am talking like an unbeliever, an outsider. My faith is strong, but the kind of rigidity shown by Pastor Lindeman bothers me. I feel he was pointing out that talking the way I did dishonors the Bible study and my parents—my dad the principal of this church's school even. I should have known better. Social tensions are already high, within the congregation, and I fear my parents are being judged for raising such a liberal girl. I wasn't being liberal, simply inarticulate.

The roots of a wide ancient elm tree lift and slant the sidewalk, on which my family walk to church every Sunday, when I was a kid in Hadar, Nebraska. Back then I tried to envision how this lift had occurred, as we step over it weekly. I think about it still.

"Do you think this was a slow process or happened all at once?" I ask my parents.

"The roots of the tree lifted the sidewalk up over time," Dad says. I saw that this had happened; the gnarly roots are twisted, in a slow motion slither, under the slabs of concrete that are angled sharply up over the flat parts of the walkway.

"But do you think anyone could feel this happening? What if I stood here for a long time? Would I feel the lift?"

"Probably not," Dad replies, getting impatient. "Pioneers or previous church members most likely planted these trees here and the sidewalk was made."

"Are we the only generation who have a buckled sidewalk?" I ask. Surely the tree was here first and they must have thought this might happen.

"I don't know."

"Why didn't they put the sidewalk further away from the tree?"

"I don't know May be they didn't think it would get so big. Enough now, we're almost to church."

Trees where I grew up in Hadar, Nebraska, have such intention and history. Someone had planted them in a particular spot for a purpose, like the shade or protection from the wind in shelterbelts. I love this about our neighborhood. We walk to church every Sunday, attending each week because Dad was the principal of this church's school Immanuel Lutheran. He knows the inner workings, is an insider, a "called worker," and so my family and me know more than the average congregation member too. The conversation about trees is over, because there are more important things at hand—like worship and singing. According to Dad, I have to put aside my questions and pay attention to the service we are about to attend.

Dad's position, as the principal and teacher at Immanuel Lutheran School, is a called position. This call system is how our church, as part of a wider synod—network of similar churches—reaches out to fill positions. Called workers sort of stand out in a small congregation, like ours, because these positions are ones of leadership and instruction. Called workers don't just attend church. The pastor's job, for instance, is to lead the worship every week, as well as teach the catechism classes and Bible studies. The congregation members send their kids to our school, as my dad had sent us—we had been the only called worker's kids when I was young. I feel different then all of my classmates, self-conscience that we are being held to a higher standard, and that we are always scrutinized more closely. We are expected to behave politely, in church, and to listen intently. Our house, the "teacherage" as we call it, is right next door to the school, just as Pastor's is right next door to the church, the parsonage. We wouldn't really ever escape dad's job, his call.

What does this mean?

Did my parents stifle my love of nature? Not really. But to them our walk to church is about the destination. The sidewalk is slanted and uneven, a hazard even. It wasn't as profound for them as it was for me. They step over it, without a second thought, because the phenomena of the heavy inanimate concrete being lifted up by the sheer force, one could say will, of the tree, isn't as awe-inspiring for them as it is for me.

Immanuel Lutheran Church is a prairie Gothic-style structure, built in the 1800's. The first service was in 1883. We attended this church from the time I was four years old until I was twelve, when we moved away to Wisconsin. Dad would receive a call to another school. It has a wrap-around balcony, which runs along the center of the main hall of the pew, called the sanctuary. The church doors open, so that there is a view down the sanctuary towards the sacristy where a large traditional altar sits. Gold leaf accents the ornate spires of the white altar and around the tall statue of Jesus; his arms are stretching out in a welcoming posture.

My family sits in the same pew nearly every Sunday, as does most of the congregation. These pews are contoured just right to fit a sitting bottom. How could the wood be shaped to fit a backside, sloped to soften the rigidity? Wood that comes from trees that are so strong and hard that they can lift sidewalks. How could it possibly be contoured in this way? I keep these questions to myself, of course, for the pre-service music has begun, and this is the time to look over the bulletin and not to talk.

The bulletin, a paper booklet that shows church announcements and the order of service, is printed every Sunday. I remember a lovely mountain vista on the cover. "Let the rivers clap their hands and the mountains sing together," from Psalm ninety-eight, is written on the over. This metaphor makes me smile. Are the mountains singing because they’re in a landslide? I turn the cover over and see what the theme is for the service. "Rejoice in the LORD," it says. After church, I save this bulletin in a shoebox where I save all of the other bulletins that have colorful,

nature-themed covers. The combination of God with nature was profound to me. The nature covers made the Psalms more real for me.

The congregation starts singing the first hymn poorly. It is early in the morning; everyone has had coffee, but probably hasn't talked much before sitting down. Most members are farmers. They hurry through their chores, to get in the shower, before leaving. Some drive for many miles from their farms. The church is filled with the sound of throats clearing, voices cracking at the high notes. My mom had taught me not to drink too much milk before church, because the phlegm inhibits singing. Her voice always sings out strong, clear. She had learned from her high school voice lessons how to be ready to hit the very first note.

I am embarrassed that she is the loudest, that she stood out even though she sounds better than anyone else. By the second verse, other voices are warmed up, phlegm is dislodged, and the high notes are hit a little bit closer. I squirm when Mom's operatic-like soprano descant harmonizes with the rest of the singers. Why does she do that? Why doesn't she just follow along with what everyone else was doing? Why couldn't we just be normal?

Lutheran churches are known for singing. Even though ours takes a while to warm up, we are a strong singing congregation. Having an old traditional pipe organ helps with this. I love feeling the reverberation of the largest pipes from which the lowest, deepest sounds come. This sound vibrates from the balcony down to our pews, and feels as if it were coming from my own chest. The squeaking high notes, from the tiniest pipes, contrast the deepness of the low tones and I feel them in my

eyebrows. I don't think anyone else experienced these sounds as I did, so physical and personal.

What does this mean?

Tradition is something I see the value in, as well as the value of such an ornate building. However, it does not stop there. Besides our weekly duties, I have a short Bible class every morning at school and Sunday school after the Sunday service. It saturates our lives; it is our lives. I don't feel like there is room for anything else, even as a kid, and I feel guilty for thinking there might *be* anything else. Those *other* things being learning about other cultures; what are their religious traditions? This saturation was so insular, rigid. Yes, I was a kid and routine was good, and my family didn't feel the need to branch out for the sake of branching out. But, I didn't even know there was a world outside of this one until I left as an adult. Was that normal? I wonder about that and it makes me feel less prepared as an adult later in life.

The annual Mission Service, however, is not held in this building but under the canopy of ancient and enormous elm, maple, and cottonwood trees, in my front yard. Mission Sunday is part of the Christian church calendar, at the end of summer, which celebrates and recognizes a proclamation Jesus made before ascending into heaven. We call this proclamation "The Great Commission" and, through it, Jesus taught his disciples at the time to go into the world and spread his word to all people. We recognize this as a message to us as well, that it is our job to also "make

disciples." The mission aspect of this service may be why we held this service outside. We want the neighborhood to hear us and see us sing. They could watch us file into church every Sunday, as they drove down Hadar's one main street, but this is even more welcoming. "Pull up a chair and join us," we say, "we'd love to share this message with you."

For me, this service is also a special blending of our worship traditions with the natural world. We aren't looking to worship nature, but worship *in* nature**.** The point for the rest of the congregation isn't that—it was simply practical. Nebraska is humid in late summer—the church building becomes sweltering. Being outside allows us to enjoy a cool breeze. It is significant for me, partially because, it is so out of the ordinary. I felt out of place at first—worship couldn't be on the mundane front yard that I walk across every day. Worship has to be special and in a specific place. Noticing how pleasant the outside experience is, and the thankfulness people showed for this space, helped me accept that this is suitable.

It is also significant because, as I notice on church bulletins, the Psalms frequently paint a picture of how nature praises God the creator. There are other examples, in the Bible, where Jesus challenges unbelievers by saying that it didn't matter that they don't worship him—the Earth rejoices in him. Out of rocks, he could raise joyful songs; he was that powerful, that worthy of awe. These metaphors that he paints always make me think about the power he has over nature to ask for this, and also the devotion that nature might have for the creator. The images alone of what a singing mountain meant blew my mind as a child and, still does, today.

The blue, late summer sky was our ceiling, along with the full green leaves of my front yard's trees. The seeds that fell, and the blades of grass that tickled our feet during the service, easily distracted all of us kids. My little brother, Stephen, and I caught the helicopter seeds that the maples dropped, so-called because they spun in the air as they fell. They were made of two long wing-like sections connected together, like a coat hanger. The elders set up metal folding chairs on the lawn. The metal sunk into the sod and squeaked even more than usual. We squirmed on the hard chairs that were less forgiving than those comfortable, contoured wooden pews.

What does this mean?

Many religious traditions conduct themselves outside. "Come Gather by the River" is sung in spirituals, revivals often met in tents out-of-doors. We were fortunate to have such an old traditional church building, and we were also blessed with mature trees surrounding that property, and the adjacent lots, for my family and pastor's homes. We were wealthy with shade.

The idea of being in nature, as worship in and of itself, wasn't something I would discover until later—when people would tell me nature was their sanctuary, nature was their church. In Western Montana, where the landscape of the Bitterroot Mountains is so striking that it feels like a religious experience, I first encountered folks who likened the natural world to church. For them, a hike was worship. This idea was quite different than my childhood service held outdoors. We followed the same liturgy outdoors as we did in--the law and gospel were preached just the

same--the only difference was the venue. I learned, here in the Bitterroots, and elsewhere, how powerfully these tectonic structures could be in stirring up emotions and how their quiet expanse lent itself to contemplation. I knew all these things, but it had not occurred to me that it was anything like what I thought of as worship. And that was probably the point for folks who preferred a walk to sitting in a pew. The lack of structure and lack of dogma was probably comforting. The quiet contemplation is what they sought, it was a spiritual experience for them, perhaps, or it wasn't anything at all like that. They felt spiritually rejuvenated in nature, whereas I felt thankful for God's creation and humble at these behemoths of rock.

I think about what it means to be "religious" and "spiritual" a lot and whether or not one can find the former only in church and the latter only in nature. But this is reductive. There are a plethora of ways to connect with a higher being. That is why I don't always know what is meant by these words. These definitions are extremely personal, as well. However, I do feel like it's become a socially unacceptable thing to say (in some circles), if you are religious. This word comes with such loaded connotations, alliances to dogma, abuse of power, colonialism, fanaticism and proselytizing. The idea of creation by a God, who made humans, and the implied status of setting them up as the "crown of his creation" in the Garden of Eden, raises the ire of many environmentalists I'd met in Missoula. The church, as a human-made institution, has gotten a lot of things wrong. I am the first to admit this. There is a long history of abuses of power, perpetrated by powerful churches, against the weak or the poor, going against the reality of Jesus who called his believers to feed

the poor as if they were feeding him. He means actual food for those in need, but then he also means spiritual food, His word, to feed their souls.

Part of the negative secular view of organized religion comes from a lack of understanding on the part of those not in the organized religion, insiders. I have insider knowledge and organized religion is just a part of my life. I like to take this devotion and commitment and apply it to my relationship with nature, because they go hand in hand for me. But this apparent or preserved exclusivity, or insular nature of organized religion, also scares some people away.

Sanja Harris stands in front of me flabbergasted, because I just told her swearing is a sin.

"And if you don't repent your sins, you'll go to hell," I say. It seems simple enough to me, as we stand in the hallway of our high school. Students slam red lockers and crowd around us in rows, like cattle down a chute. I misguidedly feel as though I clearly understand *all* there is to know about the idea of Original Sin, since I've always gone to church on Sundays.

But I forget that I'm young, *only* a sophomore here at Sevastopol Public High School, my first non-church school. Still fresh from confirmation classes in the eighth grade, I am behind in social nuance and as well as unaccustomed to meeting people who haven't all gone to church for as long as I have. I don't realize that slamming the dogma of my religion onto unsuspecting classmates is pretty rude.

"You can't tell me I'm going to hell!" she shouts back. I don't understand why she's so mad. This is just a simple fact to me. We learned law and gospel way back in

the church basement of my Sunday school days. I didn't know what to do with her challenge, her rejection.

"Well, it's in the Bible. If you sin, the final punishment is hell. But don't worry! God forgives you, you just need to be sorry." I am only using swearing as an example; I am trying to say that anyone who sins deserves hell. “The joy of the gospel is that we're forgiven,” I continue. I didn't know my audience well enough. She had not taken twelve years of Bible studies as I had, and she didn't see how this made sense, how it was actually a comfort and not a harsh, punitive system. But I wouldn't have either if someone had just blurted this out to me without any context.

Starting to feel sorry for her, she repeats, "You just can't tell me I'm going to hell. You can't know that."

"Of course, I don't know that exactly. I’m just saying what sin is and what the punishment is. I’m trying to tell you that Jesus forgives. That's the good news. And it's awesome! That's all." She doesn't hear the last part, because she storms off into the crowd as it heads to class.

What does it mean?

It was all very black and white for me then: sin equals death. Repent and be saved. But I *love* to swear now as an adult, so what does that say? Hypocrite? It says: I was a clueless teenager. It's not that sin doesn't equal death; I still think that's true and it's a tenant of my religion. What I *learned* was to get better at reading my audience. Better at listening more and sharing less about harsh punishments. Similar interactions, like this, did not win me friends who trusted or respected my

beliefs. I also learned to not judge my friends when I make mistakes like everyone else.

Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, in his essay “The Weight of Glory,” says we're outside of the world, the other side of the door. The "we" here might be believers and we're outside of the world because we're different. I was on a different side of the door than Sanja and she could not understand what I was trying to tell her through the keyhole. Did I need to open the door? I was trying to. I wanted her to join me, to see how nice the side of belief had been for me.

The teaching about sin and its consequences is a way to judge, but not for me, for God. Like this run in with Sanja, and later with Purva, I learned that it's not my place to tell people their eternal business. It's really just insider knowledge, because it doesn't make sense to folks who aren't on the inside and it can be easily misconstrued. It's not even considered true that there is sin to those outside the faith. But more than misunderstanding, what I've learned from that high school run-in was that I couldn't apply this insider knowledge to anyone out of the blue. There are many more tolerable and beautiful things about my religion that I could have shared with Sanja, instead of this heavy law and death stuff. Above all else there is love, forgiveness, and grace.

The Dr. Seuss book, *The Lorax* struck a chord with me as kid, because the character of the Lorax spoke for the trees. He was standing up for the voiceless. Around this time, I visited Sea World in Aurora, Ohio, and developed an intense love for the natural world, joining Greenpeace as an eight year old. This was before I

really understood the implications of animal captivity, of course, but I read about activists saving whales out on the ocean. It was terribly romantic to my young mind. I even adopted a whale through Greenpeace's program and stared at the black and white portrait of Patch's fin as it peeked out of the water. I hoped I was really helping him. This was the nineteen eighties and the "Save the Whales" campaign was in full swing. I was on that bandwagon.

I read all the books at the public library about whales, all the golden-colored *National Geographic* magazines too. I wept at the documentaries on whaling in Japan; the blood and violence hurt me. It may also have been too gory for me to even be watching, but it was also the sadness at the deaths of such larger-than-life creatures, their harvest.

Around the same time, Mom gave me the book called *Just a Dream* by Chris Van Allsburg. This book was about a boy who didn't take any notice of or care at all for nature — he littered, didn't separate the recycling. But then he went to sleep and dreamed (travelling in his little bed) that the Earth was filled with junk, an enormous garbage heap. He then saw nothing but freeways, toxic waste — much like in the *Lorax* where the industry driving the Thneed business eventually destroys all the truffula trees. When this boy woke up, he had a change of heart. He went out and picked up his litter, he went through the recycling, and he planted a tree. This, of course, was just a very simple, easy, environmental message for kids. But both of these books stayed with me.

On the cover of this book, my Mom wrote: "Merry Christmas, keep caring for the Earth God has given us and Keep HIS Plan (she underlined it) in mind." Basically telling me not to get too carried away with my environmental leanings.

Obviously, both of these as books, and stories, are one author's interpretation and ideas. But I cannot dismiss any story as "just" stories or not important. I knew this, even as a kid, those stories are important, fictional or not. I knew this back from Sunday school. Those bible stories were vital, and I took them seriously. So, I took all stories seriously, and they created my cultural sense of identity.

Mom supported me by donating to Greenpeace, and adopting the whale for me, but she also wanted me to be careful. This was the dichotomy I grew up with, or the struggle, between ideals sometimes seemingly at odds with one another. Take care of God's Earth, but don't get carried away, because what you're doing isn't as important as God's plan. But, what if I believed it was God's plan for me to care for the Earth? Was that not valid? What she probably meant was, stop being too much: too much like a worldly activist, too materialistic, too secular. As I grew up in my angst, I felt like Mom and Dad downplayed my passions. It's not popular to be an overwrought, overly emotional, activist-like person in my household. It might have been focused on just the overly emotional part, curbing pre-pubescent mood swings.

But, Mom was also trying to point out where to focus. She had resource conservation in mind as well, but she wouldn't call it saving the Earth. She excelled at saving things, setting them aside to reuse them, finding new uses for them. This was the way we were environmentalists in my family, although, we'd never claim the title— because it was too controversial. My mother's mother, Gramma Oros,

who had grown up during the depression, burned their paper trash, composted all food waste and cleaned all plastic, tin and what have you, to recycle or reuse. They both complained about over-packaging, like it was a sin—and maybe it was—but that's not the point. I came from a tradition of not wasting; I just took it a little too far, perhaps, in mom's eyes.

"Hanging laundry saves energy!" I proselytized.

"Whose energy?" Mom asked, as she hung the sheets out on the backyard clothesline, the wind whipping them into her red face. She has hauled the heavy basket up from the washer and dryer in the basement.

"The … Earth's …" I said. It hadn't occurred to me that doing laundry like this was harder work, it was *right* in my eyes. I helped her finish hanging the sheets.

What does it mean?

For me it was a mission, a quest. Recycling, reducing carbon footprints, and conserving wildlife, had a larger meaning. Their simple pragmatism annoyed me, for its lack of fervor for "the cause." Once I grew, I realized being practical could be a way of life. They were good examples of this; I also learned how exhausting it is to run in circles for a cause that takes planet-wide cooperation and not just the passions of a *thirteen year-old.*

"Missionaries like that are what's wrong with organized religion." Purva practically spits at me in her thick Swiss-German accent. She's referring to a

character in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. I made the mistake of bringing it up. "The father was a monster," she says.

"Um, yeah, he was written to be pretty terrible." I try and make sense of her anger. "Not all missionaries are like that, " I say weakly. “I know missionaries in Thailand; they aren’t anything like the domineering, stubborn father character in the book.” Purva doesn't seem to hear me or want to listen.

It's Easter weekend, the beginning of our spring break at school. I'm here with Purva's daughter, Andrea, who I live with at the University of Montana. We are in Andrea’s childhood home, an hour south of Missoula, in the tiny valley town of Victor, Montana. Her father built this house on the side of a mountain, in the foothills to the Bitterroot Mountains.

“The father is egotistical and domineering,” Purva continues. I've unintentionally riled her up; I thought we could bond, or at least have something pleasant to talk about after Andrea told me she reads Kingsolver. Purva's hate for the missionary father in the novel brings us to a stalemate, and I feel like she's taking it out on me. She has a point. I think about the part in the novel where he’s planting a garden in an African climate. Instead of listening to the wisdom of the native women, he plants seed he brought with him from the states and discounts their advice for building up the soil. His garden, unsurprisingly, fails to pollinate and is washed away in the first heavy rain.

"How about *Prodigal Summer,*" I ask, hoping this is a less controversial novel.

"Oh, I loved that one," she says. Of course you do, I think. That novel is sensual and meditates on relationships with nature. It is beautifully realized, with

two central and very strong female characters. There is no overbearing patriarchy in that novel. I smile.

"Yeah, me too! It was beautiful, sexy." I try to laugh with her. Maybe, she thinks I'm a prude. Andrea has surely told her I go to church. I'm thankful Andrea never judges me, or been mean about this fact, but I can tell this aspect of me displeases Purva. Perhaps, she doesn't know how to talk to me, since I follow a patriarchal system. My god is God the Father. Maybe, she feels sorry for my perceived naiveté and me.

I feel sorry for me. I am naïve, but not about church, about her. I just want to hear what she thinks of the book and I think it would be positive. I feel as though I am the first churchy person Purva could empty her pent-up anger for organized religion on. I really want to hear the story of what kind of rocks she collects and displays on bookshelves all over her living room. I do this same thing. I'd have taken a tour of the land, too. They cultivate gardens, flower beds, reroute a stream and build their tepee that sits next to the house. Her lifestyle, of living off the land, is a life I admire. But she, as many Montana mountain dwellers, is not quick to share or let anyone in. She came here to escape questions, to avoid sharing and to live her life as she wants. The experience isn't all bad though. Dinner is delicious and, once we walk around outside, Purva warms up to my enthusiasm to learn about their lives and their home. I mean no harm. Andrea is important to me, and, in turn, so are her parents and this place.

In Purva's living room, light streams in from the large, south-facing windows, and the exposed wood of the house's frame fills the room with the smells of the

forest. In addition to the succulents she nurtures, rocks and the crystals she has found while hiking, is the picture of a kind-looking Asian man that sits atop a tall wardrobe. This is her guru. How could I expect open-mindedness, even though I brought it? I should ask about her guru, what he taught, how this manifested in their lives and what following him meant for her. Purva is the name he had given her; she gives up her Christian name of Katherine. This is important to her and I am always eager to hear about people's passions. I didn't know my Christianity would get in the way of that. I held no judgment, just curiosity. Couldn't we meet there at wonder?

What does it mean?

I don't even feel the need to share God's word with Purva; she certainly won't have taken well to that. What does it say when I want to hear about her guru, but I don't know how to ask? She rails against the closed-mindedness of Kingsolver's missionary character, and indirectly me, but am I not showing eagerness to learn from her?

My story as an "insider," a believer of God, is of one who is also very much in love with the world around her. I want to conserve and save the Earth. I also want to learn the different ways of understanding Earth systems, geologically, physically, and philosophically. I feel like I'm on the wrong side of the environmental movement, because of my conservative faith. I feel different from my fellow churchgoers, because I cannot help but look at the world around me.

My faith and my desire to protect the environment come from the same place in my heart. They are connected as part of the same ecology, the ecology of me. If ecology states that all living organisms are interconnected, which they are, then, for me to live on this Earth, my faith must be connected to all living things. I work to share my faith with people, as I work to take care of the land created, as I believe, by God. Our little synod, with its Sunday school classrooms, help forge an appreciation for learning and the crooked tree along the walk to church helps develop my curiosity of the wonders of the physical world around me. Lewis' words are a beautiful analogy that I will continue to unpack here, and his point is important to note. I also want to be involved in the mess of the world. To give voice where there is none. I had a lot to say and I could help voices be heard.

DAD AND THE VOLKSWAGEN

"You'll need this," Mom says as she slaps a book in my hands while Dad and I make the final preparations for a journey west. I look at the heavy volume: *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: Guide for the Complete Idiot*. Dad is giving me this old and beat-up 1968 Volkswagen Camper bus as my college graduation gift even though I had graduated from the University of Montana the summer before. In the interim, he worked to get it ready and we'll be driving it from Green Bay, Wisconsin to the far west side of Montana.

"Do you know which type the bus is?" she asks. I know the answer because the book she's given me is a newer edition of the one I've watched Dad read since I was a kid, and I pay attention.

"Type II."

I also know to call it a bus or Camper, not a van, and since its model year is 1968, it's pre-Westfalia. Type II refers to the fact that this is the second car model made by Volkswagen, the first being the Beetle. It has a 1.5-liter, air-cooled engine, and that old Volkswagen sound, the guttural rumblings of a small but eager motor that emanates from just behind the rear tires. This differs from the Westfalia models, which came out in the 1970s and have a more modern engine in the front. To my dad, this is selling out.

"Good girl." She smiles. "You'll be fine."

"It's a great book!" Dad chimes in.

The simple, workable engine design of these old Volkswagens is why my dad's father, Bob Schmiel, bought this very bus and many other Volkswagens for his

family over the years. They were inexpensive to purchase and easy to work on. His sons grew up rebuilding engines, popping clutches, and remembering, always, to add oil. My dad also found and fixed up Mom's first car, a green VW Beetle, when they were dating in high school. He taught her how to drive manual transmission, and now he is teaching me.

"You'll be fine," Mom says. I can see that she has the restrained *"I'm worried"* look about her. "I made sure Dad checked that the seat belts were attached and work," she adds to me under her breath.

I've grown up watching Dad drive this bus around the Midwest. Grandpa Schmiel found this bus for him when we lived in Nebraska, and it lived a rusty life in that humid climate. Dad used to find farmers who would let him park it in their barns for the winter; he wanted to keep it out of the elements, and it was never our primary vehicle. Once he completely rebuilt the engine himself. He followed an earlier edition of this Volkswagen book, while taking up our garage for a winter when he lived in Norfolk, Nebraska. In seventh grade, my classmates called it the Schmiel-Mobile when they saw him picking us up from school. I was mortified. This embarrassment took a few years to wane and by high school I wanted to drive the bus. My brother had dibs first, even though I'm the oldest. He picked up on the stick shift faster than I did, and he had endless fun hanging out in the bus with friends. I found just sitting around boring. I wanted to go places but didn't yet have anywhere to go.

Dad continues the rundown on the tools I need in the bus at all times: a wrench, a socket set, and a tire gauge.

"And never ever, *ever,* run out of oil," he says. "You'll burn through the motor. This thing is thirsty for oil. Every time you fill up, check it. And when you change it, don't wrench the nuts down too tight. It'll warp the oil pan."

With these instructions, we buckle in after getting the cooler ready and say goodbye. I wish Mom would come with us, too.

"Mom made sure I fixed the seatbelts," Dad tells me conspiratorially as we secure the belts with a click. "I think it takes all the fun out of it, but they do work." He smiles as he pulls on the strap to show me. The strap is made of black canvas and does not stretch like modern seatbelts that wind up the slack; this rigid belt is bolted to the wall above and behind the driver and passenger's side seats. I don't remember ever wearing a seatbelt in this thing and neither does he, but on this trip we do, and I do every day after. I do this because I'm terrified. Fixing is a generous term; the seatbelts are still a pain to hook in. The mechanism is old and stiff here, too. Sliding the buckle together is a finicky, not smooth, process.

When I'd first moved out to Montana, I knew that Missoula, a hub for the cool, countercultural, and outdoorsy, would be the perfect home for the bus, but Dad didn't believe me. He said the bus wasn't road ready when I asked to take it to Missoula. When the family came out for my college graduation, Dad noticed all the VWs being driven around town, "The bus belongs out here!" I've had to accept that he doesn't listen to me.

It took him a year to get the bus ready. The engine was sound—he had made sure of that—but there were a lot of little details that needed attention. He and my brother Stephen had been working on it all that summer, replacing the canvas on the pop-up, getting some wiring fixed so the turn signals and headlights worked. I thought that Stephen would want it, but its quirks and built-in extra needs, made it unrealistic for him because he drove a lot across Wisconsin between Milwaukee and New Ulm, Minnesota for college. He needed something faster and more reliable on the freeways. By the time the bus was deemed ready for me to take on, the burden of its upkeep and family heirloom status weighing on my mind, there was still a plethora of little things to fix. I would discover these later bit by bit, but today it is as road-ready as it is going to get and I am excited to finally have it, to believe that the place I had chosen to live is worth this family investment.

I was over the lure of counterculture statements associated with the Volkswagen by the time it became mine. It is now less of a hippie van, but it will always remain the Schmiel-Mobile I remember from my youth. I get peace signs when I drive down the road, but what's better is just a wave from another Volkswagen driver. These range from the eager flapping of hands out of the window to a reserved palm raised up to the flat windshield. I like feeling as if I'm part of a community and I also love checking out other Volkswagens with their iconic flat fronts. The irony of now owning a motorized vehicle is not lost on me, especially because Dad is taking me back to Missoula to begin a job as a city bicycling ambassador. This job will require me to work on and from my bike every day. But

Dad decided this was my graduation gift, and it was my turn for the responsibility and the burden of this family project-car.

I don't think about how impractical the bus's quirks would turn out to be. Volkswagens are impractical in cold climates in general and this one in particular. The box that collects the heat made from the engine wouldn't connect nor did the installed pipes reach the eleven feet to the vents in the front. The engine makes plenty of warmth, but it isn't captured and brought up to the front where it would do me any good; this is the major flaw in the rear engine design. Little did I know that coming December, when I drove it to get across town, I would see my breath condense in front of me. It would be like driving a refrigerator. Friends and I would bundle up, joke about it, and I'd have to buy a propane space heater to put near my feet to take the edge off.

Dad pulls some tubing that looks like it belongs on a vacuum cleaner from the cubby behind the front seat.

"Just use this aluminum tubing and connect the heater box sometimes when it's cold." But it's June now and the air is finally getting the warm glow of summer when it feels like it could never be cold again. I don't know I'll spend November later that year under the bus with duct tape trying to connect this flimsy aluminum, never feeling warmth from the vents.

No worries, I think, now. I'll figure something out. Another Schmiel motto, we're resourceful at least.

This Type II Volkswagen engine might be a source of pride in our family, but it's not a source of power, and we got underway for what we plan as a three or four-day journey, without air conditioning, without a radio.

"Where's the radio?" I ask dad. He tells me that during the work he and Stephen had been doing early that year, Stephen, planning to install a real system one day, had taken out the radio. Those dreams were never realized and, even though I tried not to, I began to resent that rectangular-shaped hole in the dashboard. A '68 VW doesn't have much in the way of technology on its dash anyway. This one is thick black plastic, with only two round displays in front of the driver, one for the speedometer and odometer, and one that lights up with a red G if there's a problem with the generator and with an O if the oil is low. The radio had only been a simple AM and FM, but it would have been nice to have while driving across the Midwest.

One thing I didn't remember from my time as a kid is how loud the bus is. One thing I *did* remember from my one high school driving lesson is that it's terrifying to drive.

"Yeah, the steering is really loose, you have to really hold on. The problem is in the column. I can't really tighten it. You'll get used to it." You'll get used to it. Explaining this to people over the years has not been easy, but I trust my dad. This is the best we can do for now. Adapt or die, sink or swim. Get used to it and hold on. So hold on I did, my hands vibrating against the bus-sized steering wheel, the circumference of which is bigger than a dinner plate, by far, but not quite as large as a hula hoop.

Dusk descends into a calm early summer sunset on the hilly stretch of a two-lane country highway. Inside the bus, it's windy, nerve-wracking, and loud, like being inside of a vacuum cleaner. I feel the same fear and frustration I did when I was sixteen years old and first learning to drive, but no other car can train you for how to drive a VW bus down the highway. Especially this bus. Guiding this metal machine is a full-body drive, just like when I first learned to ride a bike; I use gentle movements and don't overcorrect. My arms are held out in front of me and I sit upright, leaning in to have full grasp and control. I have to keep from toppling us, have to convince myself I can't tip over the whole thing. My biceps and shoulders ache immediately and I feel tightness in my shoulders. To downshift I must slam my left leg all the way to the floor, engage the clutch, and scoot up in the seat. Taking my hand off the wheel seems ridiculously risky and I finagle, jiggle, and ease the gearshift into the gear I want. It's all so tricky, finding where the gears are, where the steering wants to be and doing all of this at the same time. I imagine I'm playing a drum set, all limbs moving at once to create the desired rhythm. The bus is all about flow, flowing with the wind, flowing with the steering, but it is a clunky flow, jerky and rough and a ton of work.

"I'm sending us off of the road!" I yell, panicking. But it's just a curve. I slow for each of these so the momentum doesn't send us careening off in a grassy Minnesota ditch.

My heart races and Dad simply directs.

"Don't overcorrect. Just hold it steady," Dad says.

"There is no steady!" I yell back. I don't feel like I can find the sweet spot of the steering, not when I have to keep my arms in constant motion, micro-correcting the vibrating wheel. It's like the shaking of a lawn mower, and I remember hating that about mowing the lawn.

"Is it supposed to be shaking this much?" I ask.

"Yeah, the road vibrates through to the steering column. It doesn't have shocks like other cars. It's not a smooth vehicle." I give up after only an hour, exhausted by the vibrations and wind. I shake with adrenaline and the terrifying challenge. I retreat to the back and look at the atlas instead.

We settle into the deep quiet of pause between conversations.

"Since we we're so close to Nebraska," I say, "why not take a trip to Hadar?" We used to live in Hadar, Nebraska, but moved to northern Wisconsin when I was thirteen. Hadar is just two hours down the road from Vermillion, South Dakota; I want to swing through and see a friend of mine from college. I start furiously texting Daniel for the rest of the day. "Let's stay in Vermillion for the night. I know people there," I tell Dad.

We pull into Vermillion late around 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Dad is exhausted and I realize for the first time that the lack of radio and the inability to have a conversation over the roar is getting to him. He accepts the whiskey Daniel's mom, Deb Mollet, graciously offers, and as he sips he doesn't stop chatting.

"The road was sure windy today," he says, happily sipping Jack and Coke. His arms are shaking from the road weariness.

"Yeah," I say. "I drove just an hour and could barely keep it on the road!" We laugh. I still don't know how Dad drove all day.

"I've always liked those Volkswagens," Deb says. "How long have you had it?"

"For a long time," Dad says. "My father bought it in Nebraska twenty years ago." We smile as we sit around the kitchen island in the darkened house. Daniel's dad, an early-rising farmer, has already gone to bed.

"Well," Daniel says to me, "want to meet my bar?" Daniel and I had had a tradition of hanging out in dive bars in Missoula. For him to show me his hometown was to show me his favorite local bar.

"Yes!" I say, eager to do anything other than drive. "Want to join us Dad, or do you want to get to bed early?"

"I think I'm going to sleep," he says. Deb shows him where we'll stay in Daniel's and his brother's old childhood room: two twin beds sandwiched in a small space.

In the quiet of the Mollets' kitchen, when whiskey and conversation were offered, I could see the desperation in Dad's need for company, chatter, and relaxation. When all the chatting we had not done that day came out, I felt a pang of sorrow and guilt. I had not been good company on the road that day. I had not been a fun road trip companion. I tried, but I could only register the rumble of the engine and the whir of the wind, both lonely sounds. That's all Dad had heard too.

I wouldn't yet know until years later how exhausting a day of driving that bus is until I did it alone, talking to myself to hear any conversation.

Tonight I want to hang out with Daniel. I feel guilty leaving Dad alone in an unknown place. We are a travel team, but I figure he needs the rest. Poor Dad has been doing all the work and I just want to catch up with an old friend. It's like I'm the parent making sure he gets to bed okay so I can go out, leaving him with a babysitter. Super weird. Or it's like I still live at home and I'm going out while he sleeps. In those days, I'd find him asleep in the rocking chair waiting up for me, shuffling to bed once he saw me come through the door safe and sound.

I am out again this night, and even though we hadn't planned it, Daniel's friends keep us out until dawn. I am, yet again, the one stumbling in past two am and don't want to get on the road when nine am rolls around. He, always the father getting me up in the morning, says we have to get on the road. Misery. Hangover. Embarrassment. Driving. The day is rough until we get to Hadar; my hope that he hadn't worried about me creates an odd quiet feel in the bus.

The large green road signs start indicating familiar town names: Hadar, Stanton, and Norfolk. This makes us both smile. Sloping metal irrigation rigs interrupt the flat, verdant countryside.

"I used to drive that road to Stanton for volleyball games," Dad points to the east as we rumble by the sign and dusty dirt road. I was a kid in this place, but I realize now that Mom and Dad were my age back then, in their twenties, starting out at Dad's first teaching job at Immanuel Lutheran. I look around with new vision, wondering what it must have been like for them raising us out on this cultivated prairie land sectioned off in large swaths of fields, accessible only by dirt roads. Mom always lamented and missed the dense woods of Ohio where she and Dad

grew up. Nebraska was so wide open she felt unmoored and exposed, but she came to love the windmills, searching closely for personal metaphor by connecting with early pioneers. I wonder what Dad's metaphor for this place was or if he needed one like Mom. I hadn't really thought about his experience of this place until now. Had teaching grades four through eight in that two-room school, sometimes with as few as six students in his classroom, been enough to fill his life?

We drive into the little town of Hadar and onto Elm Street. The house is still as we remembered it, an old two-story farmhouse with a steeply pitched roof and tall drafty windows. We drive onto the gravel path alongside the yard to see if the new tenants keep a garden as Dad, who grew huge bumper crops of strawberries every year, did. Dad would let me help him pick the red fruit. I had been so proud that we could grow things in our yard, just like the farmers whose fields surrounded our town on all sides. He also brought seeds to science class at school to grow morning glories in little Styrofoam cups. We planted mine at the base of the laundry line where its blue blossoms flourished, as it crept up the pole.

Dad points to where he and Mom used to host weekend campfires and invite the other young teachers from the surrounding towns. They were a diaspora of young educators, away from their hometowns and families, lonely on the prairie. Mom and Dad were the only ones with kids at that point. I had been allowed to tag along to these parties until bedtime. Mom strung white Christmas lights on the same clothesline where my flowers grew so people wouldn't get caught by the line in the dark. As a kid, I thought the soft holiday lights casting a festive and welcoming glow

were the coolest things imaginable. I look up the house for "my" window, remembering the sounds of laughter and the crackling fire after I'd been sent to bed.

"Remember when the boys and I found that salamander?" Dad points to the drainage pipe coming out from the house.

"Yes!" One spring, out of nowhere, a small black and green salamander had been flushed out of his winter hibernation spot in our gutter. He landed on the grass before my dumbfounded brothers, who named him Mondo Gecko after the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* character they loved so much. I am amazed Dad remembers that.

Dad and I leave happily after sharing these memories. It feels good to see this place again and remember the stories. Had it been weird to call him Mr. Schmiel all those years ago? I certainly wasn't going to call him that now. It was our own silly formalism, a formalism that I adhered to, wanting to always have the right answer and be professional.

In the fourth grade, I moved from what we called the lower grades room, which held kindergarten to third grade, to the upper grades room, where fourth through eighth met. This was Dad's classroom, and I remember learning geography from him. I called him Mr. Schmiel during school days because I didn't want the other kids to be reminded that I was his daughter and think I got special treatment. He wouldn't let me get away with not doing my best either, and he would quiz me at home on the state capitals. The new lesson now was the Volkswagen, and I was on this road trip to learn how to keep it running from Mr. Schmiel.

After looking at the house, we ease next door to look at Immanuel Lutheran School where Dad used to teach. This school had only two classrooms separated from a multi-purpose room by a long hallway down the center of the one-story, blond brick building. A large metal swing set slopes between the school and our house. I point to the top of the slide.

"That's where I stayed after that dog chased me, remember?"

"I do!"

When Dad and I planned this trip from Green Bay, Wisconsin to Missoula, Montana, I eagerly discussed routes with him, like I would have as a kid, even though I felt so much had changed—so many miles had accumulated between the states on the map.

On this trip I realize I worry that I am not a kid anymore, and it becomes awkward and quiet in the bus and I sit and worry over childhood simplicity and the reality of the decisions I've made in life. Unwed pregnancy, adoption, and not knowing how to talk to Dad about "serious stuff." I see even more clearly now as I write this, that I am the grown up version of the little kid who liked geography all those years ago at this school we are looking at now. When I think about the serious parts of my life, I didn't know how to be inquisitive like I had been about state capitals. I think Dad didn't know how to ask me what I knew now about life either. So he taught me about the bus, and I asked about contingencies, what to do if this or that happened.

I want to be more like that same, innocent, does-the-right-thing little kid again. I wanted to be living a life that makes him proud, makes me proud. The year I had just spent in Missoula had been a challenge. This trip in the bus was a needed change. Before I went out to meet Dad, I packed everything up in the room I was renting, getting out of the lease with roommates with whom I had had nothing in common. This access to a vehicle would help me move out and be independent of them. I had missed my family, and this trip in the remnant Volkswagen, a reminder of home and a lifeline back to family, would help me stay connected, grounded, held accountable. The bus would also give us something to talk about on the phone and the reason to call.

As I reflected on this then, we make our way to Wyoming.

I had always wanted to see the Tetons Mountains, and Dad was flexible on our route as we headed from Nebraska across Wyoming. Since it's only early June, and we've gained considerable altitude since the plains states, it's cold and I am bundled up with a down vest over a sweater and a knit hat. I shiver while Dad fiddles with getting the best shot. Then we switch places next to the lake so I take his picture, but I have no way to show we were here together; there were few passersby to help us. If I were to put the two pictures together it would create a portrait I could frame and mail him to show that we made this trip together—drove and navigated together, and how much that meant to me.

I, now, have to find the best way to get up to Missoula from the Tetons. We were a team and he went where I directed: up Interstate 15 through Butte. This trip

was a puzzle or a quest that we figured out with the atlas. We knew maps together, and I was beginning to know this Volkswagen as he did: how to drive it, how to keep it on the road.

I pay attention close attention to how he drives up the steep grades of Teton Pass. He narrates to me to listen to the sound of the downshift into third.

"Third puts less strain on the engine. There's more power for these long hauls up." I can hear the engine's tone become deeper, but it still sounds strained.

"Is it even going to make it up?" We are going so slowly. But Dad knows what he's doing. He's spent many hours on the road and with this engine.

"Easy does it. It just takes time." Dad is forever patient as a good Volkswagen owner should be. I try to learn this patience on the road, to keep in perspective that the engine only runs as well as you take care of it, and I have to learn to listen to it. It seems like a good metaphor for life, even if Dad doesn't mean it that way.

GO BOLDLY

Sometimes I like to think that everything I ever learned, I learned while watching *Star Trek*. As a child, I watched the show so often that the *Enterprise* seemed like a real place to me, the characters as good as living. This show brought my family together, especially my dad and me. We would carefully set up the VCR to tape the episodes of the 1990s series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and read the *TV Guide* religiously for start times.

As a kid, I didn't realize that the show was modeled on real life. I knew this inherently, perhaps, because the show was familiar in some ways—sickbay I recognized as future hospitals—but I was caught up in the willing suspension of disbelief that life on a spaceship was different. For a time, I modeled my life on the fiction. Here's what I learned.

Team Work

The crew of the Starship *Enterprise* always works together. They are parts of a whole. There's engineering: they keep the ship going. Sickbay heals with just a scan, and the bridge runs command for the whole ship. This knowledge and these lessons of teamwork came in handy when I thought about chores at home. We had to work together to get things done as well. But this lesson really came together when I was a trail crew leader in Montana. Together, we built trails, bridges and set up camp. We also had to communicate well because we relied on each other's skills and expertise.

The Prime Directive

This sounded important to my young ears. This was like the Federation's moral compass. It kept their mission of exploration in check, to, yes, "boldly go where no one had gone before," but also not to interfere with another species, culture or religion.

They had this directive as well as a non-monetary society. Alcohol, too, was replaced with "synthehol," mock cocktails, tasty but not mind-altering. I could tell, but couldn't name it then, that this was meant to be a utopian society. I think *Star Trek* purposed an ideal American civilization on a ship whose mission was to "explore strange new worlds and seek out new life and new civilizations," much like the early settlers of the American West.

I also understood the importance of this directive because it reminded me of the serious topics we covered in Sunday school. I understood how Piccard could believe in something so dearly that he'd risk everything for it. The Prime Directive was like his religion; he had faith in it. Faith was important to my family. My dad was called to be a parochial school teacher; this call could be our Prime Directive. We had to uphold the standards of Christian living, set good examples and have faith. We could understand a fictional Prime Directive and take it more seriously than most. The directive also made for some fine drama because the best parts of the original series is when the captain, usually Kirk, would break the Prime Directive to save his friends; damn the man, fuck regulations, and save Spock.

Leadership

Captain Jean Luc Piccard was the model leader, stoic, smart, unyielding. I loved him. I wanted to be him. He didn't back down, he trusted his decisions; he pushed off any kind of barriers. He got his way and was listened to when he said: "Make it so." As an uncertain teenager, I wanted that kind of confidence in spades.

I also saw that my dad, who was a teacher and also the principal since his was a small parochial school, was somewhat like Piccard. They both had this role of leadership. Where Piccard was confident, my dad was humble, but they both had a way of making decisions and sticking to them. Piccard didn't explain himself when he made a decision, and neither did my dad; he discussion was just over, done. I hated this, even into my twenties and beyond. I realized that even though I loved the character of Piccard, I didn't like authority. I wanted to be in charge. I didn't want to deal with someone else's decision-making, be that a boss, manager or the like.

I always identified with Riker. He was brash and spoke his mind too quickly. He also was constantly distracted with love and infatuation. My dad was constantly telling me to stop and think before I spoke. I hurt people's feelings otherwise. What I sometimes heard was: your voice doesn't matter, don't be yourself because you're too much. Riker dealt with this better than I ever did. He'd tilt his head, scowl and lean out the door and barrel down the hallways. You could tell he sometimes hated Piccard's decisions; he'd glare but stay silent, nostrils flaring. I knew this feeling; Riker and I both had the skeptical brow down pat.

Honor

As a Klingon, Worf was obsessed with honor. It was part of his culture to be a tough, fearless warrior. In my culture, in my family, I was expected to be Lutheran, to be stoic, polite and to keep my emotions in check. I often exploded similarly to Worf with frustration when I couldn't articulate myself, but it was understood that this was inappropriate. Even more so than Riker, Worf could communicate everything with a scowl. He'd have to hold in his emotions, his objections when Piccard gave an order. He was a good crewmember, he listened to orders, but steam seemed to flow out of his ears when he clearly objected. It was hilarious most of the time, but I also understood his anger and frustration. He wanted to solve everything with a battle and so did I.

Utopia

I grew up in the small lake town of Jacksonport, Wisconsin, on the shore of Lake Michigan. I always searched the sky for stars, stared into the wide-open dark for clouds of the nebula and for pins of constellations. Winter Orion was my favorite; he'd come out in December, or earlier, and would lean over our house to the South East, shooting his arrow into the universe. The Big Dipper was always there, of course, and I'd watch its trajectory over the field across the road to the north and then to the east over the frog pond. *Star Trek* took space so much further; the crew actually traveled to planets, the show's imagination traveled to new worlds. I believed, somewhere deep down, that the universe world open up for me as well.

Past Boyfriends Who Won't go Away

The romance between Deanna Troy and Commander Riker is a reoccurring romance throughout the entire series. It began even before the first episode, "Far Point Station." They had a past relationship together, broke up and found themselves together on the Enterprise. As a kid, I found them hopelessly romantic and of course I was happy when they finally got married in the film *Star Trek: Nemesis*. Little did I know that I too would have ex-boyfriends who would never leave, love and drama dissipating over many years. Their romance, however, seemed meant to be. It took years for me to realize it's different in real life.

Time Travel

It's possible. And *Star Trek* helped prepare me for any other show or film that would deal with time travel. I can wrap by brain around it because it makes sense to me. Don't get me wrong; these episodes blew our minds when we watched them for the first time. I, of course, have re-watched everything, but recently, while I relived some of the classic time travel episodes, they still struck me as wonderful, imaginative and, if not totally plausible, and at least important in what they revealed.

There's one episode, "Inner Light" where Piccard is telepathically sent to another planet that had been destroyed hundreds of years ago when its sun went nova. They, the Ressikans, had sent a probe out before this destruction as a type of cultural record. This probe encountered the *Enterprise* and took over Piccard's mind for a few minutes. During these minutes, however, he lived a lifetime on this planet, had a wife and children and delusions that he needed to get back to a starship. It

was incredible. On this planet, he was part of the team that was trying to advance the community's technology because of their overheating sun. They were experiencing droughts, crop failures, high cancer rates. This episode was about both listening to scientists, like Piccard's character, about climate change and coming dangers that the society must plan for, and, more importantly, memory. Piccard became the Ressikan cultural record of existence, because their entire planet and race was going to be destroyed and they wanted someone to remember them.

When he picked up the flute he had learned to play in this alternate reality, he did so with sincerity and as second nature. The melodic cultural record of that planet's people was living on through his knowledge of how to play that instrument. It was just incredible that this show could go this deep into their theme of seeking out "new life and new civilizations." This particular episode, I think, was the best example and manifestation of what the *Enterprise's* mission was. And Piccard was the perfect candidate for this anthropological experience.

It didn't matter that *Star Trek* was just a TV show, a fiction. My suspension of disbelief was whole, and the characters became so well developed that it gave us so much to talk about as a family as we watched them grow as people and adapt to new challenges. That's what good fiction does, right? It teaches you something about life, about people. And, this crew was like a family—they operated like a family—and we, in turn, referred to them with almost the same affection.

There's a term in anthropology called "fictive kin." This refers to family members who are not related by blood but, when adopted into the family, are considered full family members. But when I first heard the term I thought about

how the truth of fiction for me can be just as real as reality. Does the crew of the starship *Enterprise* count as my fictive kin? They're my *fictional* kin certainly.

Dealing with Adversity

Engineering chief Geordi LaForge was kidnapped and tortured several times, once by Klingons and then by Cardassians. LaForge, blind since birth, uses a futuristic metal visor that wraps around both his eyes and allows him to see certain colors and wavelengths. In both kidnapping instances, this visor was manipulated to make him a spy since he had access to the inner workings of the ship. This was incredibly sad and jarring to watch as a kid. I'd never seen torture before, and although it was mild (PG or so for TV standards) my family loved the character of Geordi and we hurt when he hurt. He was a vulnerable member of the crew made to turn on his friends.

Worf was no stranger to adversity. He was always struggling internally, and sometimes directly, with the Klingon Empire over his role in their society because of his post in Starfleet. These worlds were often at odds with one another. Worf had a "softer side" than most Klingons having been rescued and raised by humans, since his was family was killed by Romulans. Worf's decision to be on the *Enterprise* as a member of Starfleet made some from his culture wary of his Klingon-ness. He even endured a discommendation at the hands of the Klingons' High Council, losing all status in that community. This was interesting as far as examining how one fits into a society, whether they belong to the one in which they were born or the one they chose.

Piccard was kidnapped by an alien villain, the Borg, and assimilated into their collective and then made to destroy Star Fleet. It was such a great move for the writers to do this, to raise the stakes so high. Obviously, it was amazingly dramatic, but the emotional intensity alone made these our favorite episodes. The look on Piccard's face after he was rescued as he sat alone in his quarters for the first time was heartbreaking. His eyes pleaded: *What have I done?*

The following episode, when he returns to France to heal at his brother's house, is by far the best as far as showing his character development. The dialogue between Piccard and Rolf, his older, jealous brother, is intense in its realism. Seeing Piccard out of uniform, literally wrestling with his brother in the mud over old childhood jealousies and then breaking down into tears, broke down his stoicism and made Jean-Luc human. "I wasn't strong enough," he wails, and I choke up each time I watch it. I thought I knew as a kid what it meant not to be strong enough. It was as real an emotional experience as my own because this character of the Captain had become real to me, his character's pain just as valid as anyone else's in "real life." This is how fiction works, isn't it? Shows us truths about our lives?

Joan Didion has said that we tell ourselves stories in order to live. This is as true in my family as in any other. When I moved to Montana from my parent's home in Wisconsin, boldly going to live on my own, it was the stories that kept me alive. Desperately sad, I struck out west, distant and lonely as if in outer space. Sometimes I'd listen to a voicemail from my brother over and over in the middle of the night to be able to get to sleep. I'd save messages on my phone for months—I missed my family as I would a missing limb. They were my safety net. We would retell our

stories, those from when we were kids, and the stories from our favorite TV shows. In so doing, we could laugh together, even on opposite ends of our cell phones.

The desperation in Didion's words was my desperation, too. Montana was where I went to heal, after a major loss, but I did it only by keeping the bond with my family strong. I needed that distance to know what was important. Just like Piccard and the crew fought for Earth's safety, and upheld the Federation's Prime Directive while light years away from their home, I remembered what it meant to be part of my family, even if I was in a type of diaspora, alone in the mountains, away from my society.

When *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was on network TV in the early 1990s, Dad taped episodes with our VCR. We taped a lot of things in those days, but we kept the *Star Trek* VHSes when we moved from Nebraska to Wisconsin, and we continued taping them as they aired. I then spent the entire summer between my freshman and sophomore years of high school watching all of these VHSes. This was before Netflix and binge watching became as popular as they are now. Mom was concerned—I needed to get out more and play outside. Was I depressed? Why did I watch nonstop? Dad wasn't worried so much as he just wished I had chronologically labeled all the tapes for him, organizing and cataloging our collection.

Mom was partially right; I was a little depressed because I was lonely and a little bored. We had moved from Nebraska to Wisconsin just two year prior. Eighth grade was fine; I had plenty of built-in friends from the fact we were all in one classroom together because it was a small school. Freshman year of high school, I

tried to return to Nebraska to attend a Lutheran high school, as I would have done had we stayed there. That only lasted a semester.

I attended the local high school for spring semester and didn't feel like I had a community there yet. There had been a lot of change, so instead of going out for adventure and exploration, I watched the crew of the *Enterprise* "seek out new life and new civilizations." I regaled my parents with tales of their adventures at the dinner table, showing that I was learning the seasons, studying the story lines and characters, trying to prove it wasn't as passive an activity as they thought. By the next summer, Mom and Dad made sure I had a summer job and *had* to leave the house. I still maintain my time in front of the TV was valuable time, but meeting real people and making friends was, in fact, a good idea.

I guess what I'm saying is that *Star Trek* is an important part of our family narrative; its story is our story. I may not have actually learned everything I know from watching *Star Trek*, but I might as well have. I certainly did learn how to memorize. If I could rattle off Gene Roddenberry's scripts, I could rattle off my parts for my high school's rendition of *West Side Story.* Acting cues, character development, and timing were all things I learned from *Star Trek*. And, of course, and I think this is the real reason my family liked it: *STTNG* has great acting and a delightful story arcs. As I mentioned before, the drama was gold, all the characters went through turmoil at one time or another, and they only made it through because their crew helped them. The crew was there to rescue, encourage and save. Just like a family. I'm getting sentimental, but seriously, isn't this what we like about stories?

Ironically, I would later scoff at how much TV our family watched. This was once I had a lived a little and saw how other families spend time together: game nights, singing at the piano. But I don't give us enough credit. *This* is what we did together. And we quizzed each other on episode trivia. Pop culture facts, as well as most other media, were a game to us. If Mom were listening to classical music, she'd ask us what it was because we had come across enough music to know our Bach from our Mozart. With Dad, we'd flippantly quote *Star Trek*. He'd smile, and then ask, "Which episode is that from?"

I used to think *Star Trek* was only Dad's thing, but Mom knew the episodes better than he did. She just didn't seem to have the patience for sitting and absorbing it (or re-watching it) like we did. She'd want us to fold laundry or empty the dishwasher and be productive with our time. I've since learned that she's got it down pat. We'll be five minutes into an episode and she'll say, "Oh, this is the one where Troy hears the music no one else does." And she'll be right. We love to guess based on the teaser before the opening credits what the plot is, or what the name of the episode is. It's a high honor to do this as quickly as Mom can.

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. I watched Gene Roddenberry's tales of the starship *Enterprise* over the course of the summer because I was lonely. It helped me survive. That might seem like an overstatement, but in a way it did help me. Mom was right that I was being antisocial, sure. But the best part of loving a story is telling other people about it and especially watching it with them. I love

nothing better than curling up on the couch to watch something with my family. It's these shared experiences that help make us who we are.

As much as the attending of the church was a ceremony for our family, so was watching *Star Trek*. Saying this is in no way sacrilegious, either. We go beyond being fans to believing that there is something important to these stories. I could be taking it a little far, and I'm certainly being dramatic. I have no other way to convince you what this show means to each member of my family. It's part of our shared memory, our shared narrative. It's like a totem or family crest or at least part of our story as a family.

The *Enterprise* itself is like home; the familiar music of French horns in the opening credits is a comforting anthem. I can feel just as much swell of emotion at the theme song as I can at hymns in church because it’s just as familiar and means just as much to me even if for different reasons. I guess I'm saying *Star Trek* is like a religion or at least a tradition and maybe a sacrament. Now *that* is sacrilegious, but I mean no harm. Even family is not meant to be above God, but I think He'd understand the metaphor. *Star Trek* has kept us together through my sorrow and over the many miles that have separated us. We tell ourselves these stories in order to keep on living, to keep on speaking the language of our family, and it is part of what makes us whole.

PEDAL THERAPY

"The road goes ever on, over rock and under tree…Under cloud and under star… turn at last to home afar."

~ From *The Hobbit* J.R.R. Tolkien

I take my lightweight-racing bike out for an open road test. We head due east out of Ames, Iowa, where Lincoln Way opens up to the countryside after buildings scatter and the factories begin. The road becomes a small two-lane highway and as the edges of town fade away, I'm pleasantly surprised there is a bike lane with a wide shoulder. The soil of the barren corn and soybean fields is dark and full of stubble. Luckily it is not windy because it's already a cold twenty-two degrees.

All is washed in gray, but slowly edges and corners become clear. The Barilla pasta plant, a white beacon of concrete height, is joined by another factory that slowly emerges out of the fog alongside me. Iowa opens up to me on the road. The fields, now harvested, slope from the highway, full of golden corn debris or bare yet rich with still-soft ground tilled up. I want to reach into the deep down-ness of it, as a poet would urge, but I keep clicking by. Today isn't for exploring a place as much as discovering a bike and for long overdue training, a test of solitude and endurance.

My first test in cycling endurance came in Montana when biking saved me from deep depression. When I was first reeling after my birth son's adoption, the exercise, movement, endorphins, and sense of accomplishment kept me alive in a

way. I also discovered Missoula from the saddle and I grasped the handlebars as if for dear life, soaking in the road ahead, always moving forward.

Missoula, Montana sits in a flat valley, so cycling in town was usually easy. The valley is level because it was once at the bottom of a glacial lake; the lines from the water levels are still etched into the grassy hillsides of Mount Sentinel and Mount Jumbo. When I lived in the Rattlesnake Valley, a narrow neighborhood squeezed into a green canyon, I had to bike up a long slow hill to my house if I wanted to make it home for the night. I was lucky not to encounter bears on these nights, as they loved to eat the apples in our front yard. Farther up this valley are the trails into the Rattlesnake Wilderness as well as mountain biking trails. I rarely mountain-biked even with my heavy, mountain-designed, shock-absorbing, knobby-tired rig.

The one time I rode down a gulch, I first had to ride in slow motion up the steep switchbacks alongside a grassy hill. The sun beat down on my shoulders, and my quadriceps burned with the strain of the uphill. The relief of reaching the apex quickly diminished when I had to fight for my life careening down the other side of the mountain. I rode the breaks, tense and unable to go full speed because I feared getting bludgeoned by the unforgiving boulders that lay in the path.

Today's particular road test is on level asphalt, and soft by comparison. I bought this road bike to train for and enter the *Des Moines Register* Annual Great Bike Race Across Iowa (RAGBRAI). I change hand positions a lot, trying to tuck, or sit up and save my neck from being bent over too much. Keeping the bike stable is a

challenge, as it swerves with every minor adjustment. I'm cold because I don't have my neck gator, a tight fleece circular scarf. Instead, I have wrapped up with a regular scarf, breathing and dripping snot all over it.

As I approach a farmstead, an old chocolate lab lopes forward across his yard with his younger companion. Both are barking loudly. Fear and adrenaline bite at my nerves, but I make myself speak calmly to them under my breath: "If you try to attack I will kick you in the nose." My terror of dogs attacking me is deeply rooted from a childhood run-in with the infamously scary dog of our neighborhood. These two stop in their tracks, and no longer risk chasing me. Had they heard me? I wouldn't really have kicked them, but I still wanted them to stay back.

A highway shoulder is a wasteland of animals. It is filled with the jettison of the road. While the highway itself is alive with traffic, the shoulder and bike lane are full of the dead and forgotten. I ride over the entrails of an opossum and count at least seven more carcasses over the course of the day's ride. One is a fully intact rabbit: he could have been taking a nap, his fur still soft and clean. Near him, a gray-blue pigeon, the kind you'd see in a city park. These bodies feel like company; they traveled the road before me but were not seen in time. In my bright orange fleece, I hope that the vehicles barreling down behind will see me as I pedal onward.

It is lonely on the road and the dead carcasses of road kill only reinforce this. I do not have company beyond them and my thoughts, my motivation, my competitiveness, and dreams of riding with a peloton across Iowa. These images keep me pedaling, as does the fact that if I stay moving, I stay warm. Stop and I freeze.

Turning around at 600th Ave, I read a large granite sign, "Welcome to Nevada," which is planted like an oversized tombstone at the intersection. Etched into the polished front is the profile of President Abraham Lincoln with the inscription: "Part of the Lincoln Memorial Byway."

Even against a head wind for most of the ride back, it still feels like I'm going quicker than the ride out. I don't think I am heading downhill, but it feels that way. Perhaps the bike, like a horse, knows it's headed back to the barn and my legs follow that now familiar path back with renewed gusto. It gets colder in the city limits of Ames, and the front of my scarf is now stiff and white, hardened by breath turned to ice. I hope the cars waiting on me at the intersections see this, for I feel I belong on the street in the middle of traffic more than I ever have before. I have braved the snow and the highway. I am filled with endorphins; my body is fluid, warm, and flexible. But I am getting too cold and the wind that had been silent heading east bores into me as I merge into intersections to make the left onto my home street.

Refreshed and energized, I deserve the hot shower awaiting me. It was only an hour ride, I note as I look at the clock by the bathroom door. My bike and I are broken in. I laugh as I discover that I am already getting road rash: my whole belly and upper thighs are bright red! Maybe it's from the cold and the reaction to the hot water, but mostly my skin appears irritated.

Skiers have a term for when someone crashes on the slopes and all their gear scatters pell-mell: a yard sale. This is what it's like for me racing into the shower. I throw everything off and turn on the tap to fill the room with steam as quickly as possible. I almost take a picture of myself because of how ridiculous I look, my skin

bright red in protest to the cold and to the new activity. In the tuck position, I had to bend over the length of my bike to the handlebars, and, as a result, my stomach rubbed on my legs as they completed the upward stroke while I pedaled. I simply tend to these sites with Gold Bond and move on. My body will adjust to the new frictions.

Maybe the more I pedal, the smaller my gut will become, and this problem will solve itself. The stomach will always have loose skin because of my once pregnant body. The exercise I enjoyed ten years ago, even right after giving birth in Wisconsin and back-packing up the trails of Montana, is tougher now, even with this nicest and smoothest of bikes. My body will have to catch up with this new training and dedication as it also tries to survive the graduate school activities of sitting, reading, and typing.

I am too happy with my accomplishment to let this get me down. It is a badge of honor, just like the gut itself that had once carried an eight and a half pound baby, stretched to its limit and loose. I'll never get rid of the looseness. Even after so many years, my body has recovered its natural shape, the evidence will never be erased and I don't want it to be. I have just biked twelve miles round trip in an hour and a half, and this is only the beginning.

Two weeks later I sit in the doorway to my basement rubbing my left knee, gingerly holding it straight while staring at my bike parked in the corner of the dining room. We had only been home, from a ride, for a half hour. I had proudly glowed at her while going about the laundry, then took one step downstairs and felt

the kneecap of my tired left leg, the patella, shift and dislocate. Even in pain, I was able to grab the doorframe and slide myself to the floor before falling down the steep stairs.

Before the ride, I had wrapped new bar tape on the handlebar rack for added cushioning. I watched a YouTube clip for this and there were no gaps in my tape job. It was carefully executed; an expert would be proud. I felt adept at this project after carefully and patiently pulling the foamy, pliable tape around the curved horns of the handlebars, following just what the calm bike mechanic on the video said. I knew I couldn't let myself get frustrated and pull too hard. I didn't know if the tape was easy to rip or to stretch out, so I was cautious and kept my frustrations at bay. And now this bike was truly mine. She looked so good. I was a little giddy. "You want to go for a ride?" I whispered to her as if she were my pet. "Of course you do."

This is where I should have called it a day. Wrapping bar tape was accomplishment enough, but a ride to try out these new grips certainly made sense. The weather was fair. I could have stopped at the same Nevada sign. The numbers and miles were calling, the training for the RAGBRAI, my stubbornness and desire to feel accomplished. Procrastinating the cleaning of my house for impending holiday company and cooking was certainly on my mind as well, and weather won out. I had to take advantage of a clean road before the snow, and before my house would be filled with family and guests. A ride would be a way to take care of myself, keep working at my goals before the festivities.

Once on the bike those numbers, training, and goals pushed me past the six-mile mark of the Nevada sign and into the town of Nevada itself, which would put

me at 18.2 miles round trip. A number I could round up to twenty when I told people about it, and what I would write about in the blog I started and post on Facebook. I came home and wasn't as ecstatic. I had gotten cold, and the length of the too-long ride was getting to my back. I stopped frequently to stretch, to readjust. The weather was wetter; the sights were the same.

I sit rubbing my leg and cry, because nothing hurts like a dislocated patella. The ligaments around this bone are stretched to their limit, and pull away from one another causing burning, twisting pain that immediately makes me see white and feel nauseous. The tendons that are supposed to be solid, and in place, now feel like jelly, which adds to the grossness, and I want to hurl. I had rehabbed this knee almost exactly one year prior; weeks were spent in Physical Therapy. I didn't have time for a busted knee; my whole family was coming for Thanksgiving a few days after that. I had laundry to finish, I had the house to clean, I wanted a day at home to prep cook, and I needed to be able to move.

I wanted to take the family to a nature preserve to see the wilds of Iowa and get some post-turkey exercise, but I can't even lift my knee without searing pain. I texted my personal trainer for advice: Yes, I should ice. I should get an ace bandage and elevate. Yes, all things I knew and should have been able to do, but just moving my knee hurt too badly and standing up just didn't feel possible on my tired legs. The muscles were shot, and the ice in the freezer was too far away. My brace was all the way upstairs. I called a classmate, barely audible and sniffling, to see if she could

get these things for me. I didn’t want to make this anyone's problem, but I also didn’t want to fall and make it worse.

I wanted to be rational, calm, and straightforward; this wasn't that big of a deal, not that serious of an injury. Having been hurt like this before, I knew what to do. I cried with anger at the poor timing, the pain, the annoyance, the stairs I'd have to take one at a time again, and the slowing down of my life. The inability. Iced, compressed, but not elevated enough, I was able to stand and finish my laundry with my friend's help. And I kept crying when she left, letting myself feel good and sorry for myself. It was allowed, I thought, because I would never ride again; I would never get that chance to feel so happy. I calculated the time I'd have to spend in physical therapy again and decided I wouldn't be able to train for a summer ride after all. The bike on which I had just spent a lot of money, saved for and invested in, would just sit. I was a failure and Thanksgiving Break was ruined. I tried to rationalize with myself that, of course, all was not lost, but dammit, my knee had such poor timing. And what was wrong with it anyway? I should have been able to go downstairs like a normal person. I was pissed at my knee, pissed at the injury and helplessness of my body.

I was being dramatic of course, but no one would understand how much I had wanted a road bike and what it meant to me. I saw it as a piece of the puzzle of the life I wanted to live. I wanted to be a road cyclist, but sure didn't believe I could be while prone on my floor.

Even though I more than needed it, I didn't seek counseling during my pregnancy or right after, during the post-partum and post-adoption phase. Instead, I pedaled. Experts say you should work out to stimulate endorphins, which in turn improves your mood. Runners talk about the high they get; I've even seen T-shirts that read: "Run - it's cheaper than therapy."

Over the course of my life, I've always had a bike. The first one was a lavender, banana-seat bike; it was the one on which I learned to ride. I still remember the presence of my dad, and one time my grandpa, running alongside me while I was first riding without training wheels. For my tenth birthday, I met my tough, black, gnarly mountain bike; she had knobby tires and hot pink accents. I felt legit. I felt like an adult and like a badass. From that moment on, my bikes and I have always had a special relationship.

The black Giant brand mountain bike I rode just two weeks after giving birth was no exception. I had not been able to ride during my pregnancy; I tried to, but leaning over the handlebars hurt my lower back. I missed riding, but I walked a lot instead. Everywhere. I was living in Milwaukee at the time, and the city life was perfect for a walking life. After the birth, adoption finalizations, and a few weeks recovering at my parents' home, I moved to Peninsula State Park just up the road from their house in northern Door County. I had gotten a seasonal position at the park and lived in employee housing. I sought solace in the outdoors and on the bike trails.

The reason it didn't occur to me to seek therapy during this time was, maybe, because I had the support of my family as far as my physical health and my decision

to place the baby up for adoption were concerned. We just didn't talk about it. Maybe that's why years later essays on the subject keep pouring out. I may still be working it out, but mostly I just want to tell the story. But after I made the decision to find a family to whom I would give the baby, the choice normalized; it didn't seem like something that warranted discussion with a professional. Telling my friends about it also normalized it.

After I had left the hospital, before the hearing, I moved from Milwaukee and I had only the bike. So I rode and thought and distracted myself with exercise, sunsets, aspen trees, the bay of Green Bay, and asphalt. I didn't have to articulate anything to anyone, rationalize, explain my decision, or talk about my feelings while snatching tissues from the end table in a therapist's office. I could just feel my feelings and simply enjoy becoming myself again. I'd given enough away; I got to keep my feelings to myself. I comforted myself by reengaging in an activity I loved. I pedaled through emotions, pedaled them away until I felt better.

Part of this self-prescribed therapy was an adventure; night rides and trips to a nearby coffee shop. If I didn't leave LeRoy's Coffee in Ephraim to bike back up Ephraim Bluff Road before the time the fireflies were out, then the dense forest would be really dark. It was spooky. At first, this terrified me, of course, and I rode slowly figuring out how to see in the dark, which is possible, it turns out. After a while my eyes adjusted and I could mostly tell where the smooth asphalt road was and the ditch; I didn't careen off the edge. Sounds in the trees, creaks of boughs in the breeze, would make me pedal faster. *What is that?* I unnecessarily feared for my life those first few trips. Trees creak, leaves rustle. It isn't anything to be afraid of.

What I *was* in danger of were cars not being able to see me. I was lucky that it was the off-season and traffic was low. There was the glow of a few campers' fires in the Tennison Bay or Nicolet campgrounds, these lights were beacons, and I could tell how close to home I was. This trip became my ritual every night. I stayed until the café closed, not being able to tear myself away until the last light of the sunset sank behind Ephraim Bluff. And I rode through the dark, shuddering at the sounds, psyching myself out until I expected the sounds and worked to identify them. I wasn't smart enough then to have lights on my handlebars. I might not have even known that lights for bikes existed. I made do.

Just as I had no real guide for how to place a baby up for adoption, at first, I made do. I knew I had wanted to place for adoption the moment I discovered I was pregnant, and I spoke to social workers and read the articles they gave me. But this wasn't a rite of passage I was prepared for. Not like confirmation classes I had had in the eighth grade as I prepared for communion with my peers. I had had months, years of training for that when I attended a parochial school as a child. Just as getting my driver's license required a class in high school and hours of behind-the-wheel time. These were rites of passages that our society takes seriously, but placing a child for adoption . . . there's no book for that, no preparation, yet it happens. We don't recognize it. What I did find, of course, were books on pregnancy and parenting. That's what's we know and plan for and accept as the natural order of things. "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage." Why wasn't there a way for me to be better prepared to give up my child? Is there even a way to be prepared for that? Show me where the classroom is and I'll

sit down with a notebook and pay attention. I silently pleaded for the social workers give me this knowledge. *Prepare me, make me consider options, and ask me tough questions before I try and chose an answer. Test me.*

As is case with life, the *experience* is the test and I feel I passed it, in part, because of the bike. I sometimes curled up in a depressed ball as well. There were days I failed and nights I failed too. I was so anxious and guilt-ridden, or just sad and lonely, that sometimes I couldn't sleep. Most of the time, however, I got by and sometimes excelled.

I did finally sit down and process my feelings. I went to therapy after a few months in Montana when the sadness told me it wouldn't matter if I were living or not. When it told me that the world would be a better place without me in it. At this point, I knew I needed to tell someone and I couldn't just bike away my sorrow. I didn't even really like biking at that point. It was a burden or a hassle to commute every day to work in Bozeman, especially in the winter. There in Bozeman was where I first needed to get off the bike and into a doctor's chair. In that instance, it was the office of a social worker that held private counseling sessions.

I also needed to sit in front of my pastor. I needed spiritual guidance immediately upon learning of my pregnancy, but it took moving a thousand miles away for this to feel easy. Once back in Missoula, I became active in my church in a new way than I had back home with my family and got to know Pastor Cloute well. I decided to talk about the adoption. I needed general spiritual guidance and I needed to make sure that the adoption was even okay, that I was okay, and that God still accepted me. My faith had gotten me through the long nights and long days while I

was pregnant and, afterward, I knew that God's love was holding me together. The faith wasn't so much the issue as looking at what this meant for me, who I was in my church now, and I wanted Pastor Cloute to know that I was a birthmother and this was my perspective. I was my own person in a church for the first time in Missoula and sharing this part of myself was easy because it was who I was then. They didn't know me before. They didn't know me from before or knew my parents and I needed to be away from their church and their drama with it. This new part of the journey needed to be on my terms and I was ready.

A fifty-degree day in an Iowa winter cannot be wasted, so I am on the bike. However, I have learned my lesson not to overdo it no matter how disciplined I think I can be. My knee is crying, the connective tendons are sore, strained, painful, but the kneecap itself is feeling good, so I take it easy and keep to an in-town, around-the-block trip. I wish the bike shop were open to get the risers in the rack that I need for comfort for the next big day on the road. I will have to get clearance from the orthopedic doctor this week and keep hitting the physical therapy exercises hard. I want to be in bike shape for my birth son Paul's visit in March and the bike rides we'll take this summer in Madison, if not for RAGBRAI. I bike for me, for him, and for the road, which is always there, just waiting for me to meet it.

PLACE AND ADOPTION

Contractions washed over me like waves from a heavy ocean, while the monitor strapped to my belly etched out the crests and troughs. All around the noisy and crowded delivery room tools clattered in metal pans, machines beeped, multiple nurses' murmured orders, and my mother talked incessantly. One CNA, in particular, leaned right into my face, all day, and told me when to push, and when to wait. During the delivery, she had a large, clear plastic mask over her face, and looked ready for anything. For months, I had planned with social workers and had created an open adoption when I found a couple wanting to adopt while I waited for this day. After the delivery, my dad crowded into the room with the adoptive parents. Everyone had smiled with joy and pride, as if in a fever of relief. Pictures had been snapped the baby boy cried, and I cooed.

Two weeks later, I am on my bike in Peninsula State Park and it is blissfully quiet.

I work on a maintenance crew at Peninsula State Park in northern Wisconsin on the Door County Peninsula. We clean and repair campsites and drive around the woods all day in pick-up trucks. Our lunch breaks are under the shade of trees that look out over the water. The bike I ride on after work is a heavy, grey mountain bike with a straight top bar that I take care not to slide into. My stitches hold and, surprisingly, I feel little pain.

Riding lifts the weight of the workday, the weight of so much. I know just where I am on the trail compared to the road with only a small, quick glimpse

through the trees. I know this park up and down: where the wide green leaves best muffle sounds of traffic, how to cut northeast on Hemlock Road, and when the quiet deepens.

Mature hemlocks grow right up to the edge of the Hemlock, and their dark green boughs block out the sun. The temperature drops a few degrees. The road looks prematurely old, and worn, as the acidic ground slowly absorbs and eats it away. Orange pine needles hold in the moisture at the forest floor, making the road perpetually damp. Even on hot late summer days, this road refreshes me with cool darkness and inviting peace. I can heal here.

I expected it to go differently. Movies show water breaking like a deluge that dramatically splashes to the floor. I felt only as if I had been slowly peeing my pants all night. The six am call to my OBGYN confirmed that I should go the hospital. I had given my car to a younger brother some months earlier, so I walked the couple of blocks from my apartment to the hospital. The first few hours lying in the hospital were boring as the contractions rolled over me gently. After three or more hours, by the time my best friend, and birth coach, Sarah arrived, labor had become intense. Contractions throbbed in my back and I lay as still as I could, frozen thinking if I moved they'd get worse. Little did I know that the opposite was true. I could have moved around, sat on a soft yoga ball, stretched or at least shuffled down the hallways.

The moss creeps in where the road meets forest, becoming one. As I speed past, I like to wonder what it will look like years from now. Will this road be absorbed by the forest and become a street of lichen and pine needles? What will I be like years from now? Will my stretch marks, the fossil remains of my pregnancy, fade into oblivion? I feel this road is disappearing quietly into the woods, and I with it. I bike into its safe, fecund obscurity.

The pain was tactile, as if an entity with edges I could reach out and grasp. When I could no longer take the back-to-back contractions eroding by body, I asked for an epidural. I had hoped I wouldn't need drugs but kept the option open in my birth plan. I didn't know how terrifying pain could be, my rational brain wasn't able to convince my fear that I was actually fine. My emotional center won over and I needed the discomfort to stop so I could feel safe and relax. And relax I did, after the huge needle was taken from my back I dilated to nine centimeters quickly. Delivery came up soon after that, but not before my parents arrived and mom could question my need for drugs. "How come you got an epidural?" she asked. I collapsed under this question. "What do you mean *how come*?"

I don't always hide from the crowds. During the weekdays the park is quieter, fewer people venture up here midweek, and I have the sunsets to myself when I stop to watch them. On clear, cloudless nights, the sinking sun reflects off of the bay and causes double vision with two suns; one sun goes up while the one sets down, they meet at the horizon. I read once that sailors used to think there is a

green beam of light emitted just as the sun sinks past the horizon. I sit and wait for this light. No green pulses emit beams, but there is instead orange so soft, like the inside of a cantaloupe, that I want to reach out and touch it. Soft salmon pink gives way at the edges to rose and then grey blue. When I look behind me I realize the eastern sky is just as lovely. The sun drags the curtain of its light across the rest of the sky which then slowly turns lavender, slate and then deep blue. I watch the eastern line. Amazed I had never noticed this before.

I spend these moments alone. It is enough to observe, enough to sketch the clouds or write about the colors that start as brilliant brightness, and how they fade into twilight. I have all that I need in the soft glowing, early darkness as I just watch the rotation of the Earth take me into another night.

Even though I had begun delivery quickly, time still inched slowly. The baby actually didn't have far to go from my uterus to the outside world, but since muscles must do all the work, in the form on contractions, the work was slow going. Babies need to be shown the way, pushed and guided by the mother's body. Nurses made me sit up, and I glare at them. I feel as though a huge weight is pressing down on me and sitting up made it worse. The nurses try to soothe while making me do it anyway. I was angry that I felt so nauseated and ill equipped. So unprepared. I thought the epidural would fix the pain, take more of it away so I could have focused and get to work delivering the baby. I looked at Sarah for support and suggestions. She had none. We had attended only one birth class together. They had told us to work with the pain, but I didn't know what that had meant until then. I should have

insisted we practice more pushing, more relaxing and to have been prepared for the reality of this feat I was undertaking.

Later that summer, once again captivated by a sunset, I sit in the glow of a fading orange sun reflecting off Eagle Harbor. I observe this sunset's bright peak of warmth from a patio of a café, watching the shadows grow. Wanting to enjoy the lavender evening, I stay too long. I don't realize the woods back to my house would be dark, can't-see-a-hand-in-front-of-my-face *dark*. I don't, yet, have wild fears of the dark woods; they don't hold mysterious or supernatural fears for me. I am only wary of what I might not see, deer or cars.

I would not have made it through delivery if not for the nurses telling me what to do. It was like climbing up hill, I lost my breath as I tried to push. A small, clear mask was put over my face and after each contraction I breathed in cool oxygen. I pushed then rested, over and over again. The ocean of contractions was heaviest then, and I tried to gasp for air as if treading water. Nurses commented on how quiet I was. I shrugged during a break and whispered, "I read that yelling and groaning takes away energy and power from the pushing." I had wanted to do this efficiently from the start and now didn't have enough energy for anything else.

With racing heart from an uphill climb, I pedal deliberately as I start through the deepening woods as dusk descends behind the bluff. I naively think I'll make it before dark because I can pedal as quickly as I do during the day. The dark changes

this. At first along the open fairways of the golf course, where white line at the edge of the road is visible, I can still smell the warm sun on the road. Soon enveloped by trees, a mix of deep green deciduous, and furry pines, the air suddenly cools as all light from the dimming sun is blocked. Visibility comes zero. The pines creak and whine in the slightest breeze and I jump at the amplified sounds. I tense when the edge of the road disappears, feeling unmoored, and I struggle to ride straight. My eyes adjust, eventually, and I can barely see where asphalt ends and trees begin. Because of this, what should have been a thirty-minute ride takes well over an hour.

Once the doctor said the head was crowning, the room became silent and still. The moment focused, and I somehow knew what to do. Quickly, and as easily as if he slipped out of a pool, I pushed the baby out into the room.

Alive with crickets, the woods hum. Mosquitoes buzz in my ear as I pedal with too little velocity to outrun them. The darkness slows me. I have no time for reflection or contemplation, because I'm too focused on what I don't see. I strain my ears for hazards. Without the use of my peripheral vision I won't be able to see if a deer crossed the street or, worse, a skunk. I stare into the darkness waiting for headlights. I pedal in slow motion, both hidden and exposed.

After the adoption I relished the idea of hiding, while at the same time feared I would disappear. The proximity of my family brought comfort, safety, as did the familiarity of our time-honored religious traditions. But, even thought spiritual

renewal helped. I was solitary in my experience, and new identity as a birthmother. I no longer fit in where I used to at church and could barely wrap my head around what family meant now. It meant more, but I couldn't explain that, just that more was better. I needed a different refuge than the peace I found through my beliefs. I wanted to eventually advocate for adoption as a viable option for unexpected pregnancies, but I also was not ready to do this yet. The emotions were too raw. The nuances of my decision *too nuanced*.

The moment unfroze as soon as the baby was out, and I again heard the buzzing of the room. The doctor handed the baby boy off to nurses. As he was weighed he kept his eyes wide open, and I was impressed that he was so alert. His smooth pink skin looked soft even from across the room. He measured out at eight pounds and twenty-two inches long. I told mom to take pictures, but she was so flustered she instead quickly dashed from the room. She wanted to run and tell dad, as he waited with Barb and John, that the baby was finally here. I couldn't stop smiling from the relief that the work was over—the nurses called it euphoria—the weight was lifted, and the task complete.

I pedal even more slowly once back on Sunset Trail. Here, the cedars' trunks close in casting grey shadows. I hit multiple low branches with my shoulders as I lumber along—the crack of a branch sounds like a gunshot. The strange metallic-like sound of water lapping at night distracts me, and I almost miss the house. I walk through the door on legs of jelly. The stress and fear make me hot and flushed as I

finally collapse into the warmth. I am out of breath. I shake from the adrenaline and almost weep.

Even while at peace after the birth, I was gripped by an unknown and wholly unique confusion of feelings. I felt overjoyed as well as lonely. I was proud of my accomplishment, and yet stuck with a hollow fear of "now what?" I felt content as well as completely depleted and empty. I could barely reconcile the confusion of what I felt, with what I knew to be true. Engulfed as I was in this swirl, I didn't even try to explain it to my family.

I avoid entertaining dark thoughts like: *is my son better off without me? There must be something wrong with me to decide to place him for adoption.* These questions could open swallow me whole like hidden crevasses, I don't yet know how to climb back out. Biking distracts, allows me to stay above ground and away from these thoughts. I know that it was okay to place him for adoption. Plus, he isn't without me. The point of the open adoption, the way I planned it, was that he could always find me and would never have to go searching for his biological mother some day. I am easy to reach. He has a richer life than one I could have provided, but he isn't better off without me. He has better and he has me. I have to believe it is "win-win" in that way, and that I can keep moving forward with out guilt. He can still know me. He wouldn't be one of those adopted kids who would feel abandoned, because he never was forgotten, left behind or unwanted. He always had and would always have me as Mama Erin.

My need for a safe haven is unspoken, but I am still heard by the sunsets, hemlocks, and cedars. They provide protection from sorrow without knowing they do this. Their mere presence is what I need. This is a romantic notion for they are not all that I have, nor is it that simple. In the remoteness of the woods there was no pressure to act normal, to fit in or try and explain this. The woods offer a change to be in a varied landscape surrounded by tree systems and earth processed that change with weather conditions. I relish the distraction of observation, the lack of the, sometimes, stultifying tradition.

In *The Book of the Yaak,* Rick Bass writes a letter to his friend who has fallen ill. He shares what he has seen while hiking: glacier lilies, golden tanagers, and a young bull elk as it ran across his path. He didn't only explore when friends were ill, but he says, "the walk and the woods—takes on, or seems to imbue—as with the pulse of a breathing thing—even more meaning, and deliver more understanding, when experienced in the context of illness, the context of sorrow. The woods provide."

Plate tectonics had created the shape of Door County, and Peninsula State Park long ago. When the glaciers steam rolled over North America, filling in the Great Lakes, this land remained upright, and exposed from the water. The shape of the land left over worn in by the pounding of the water, and safe inlets have formed all along the coast. These harbors protected me.

I am like a glaciated basin, sculpted by grief instead of an ice sheet. This birth altered my body and heart into a new landscape. The adoptions pushed and formed me into a new epoch of love. It is no surprise, then, that I sought the calm, unassuming, refuge of the state park's cedar and hemlock groves. Bass is right that "the woods provide," because they show me how to endure metamorphosis, and yet remain strong.